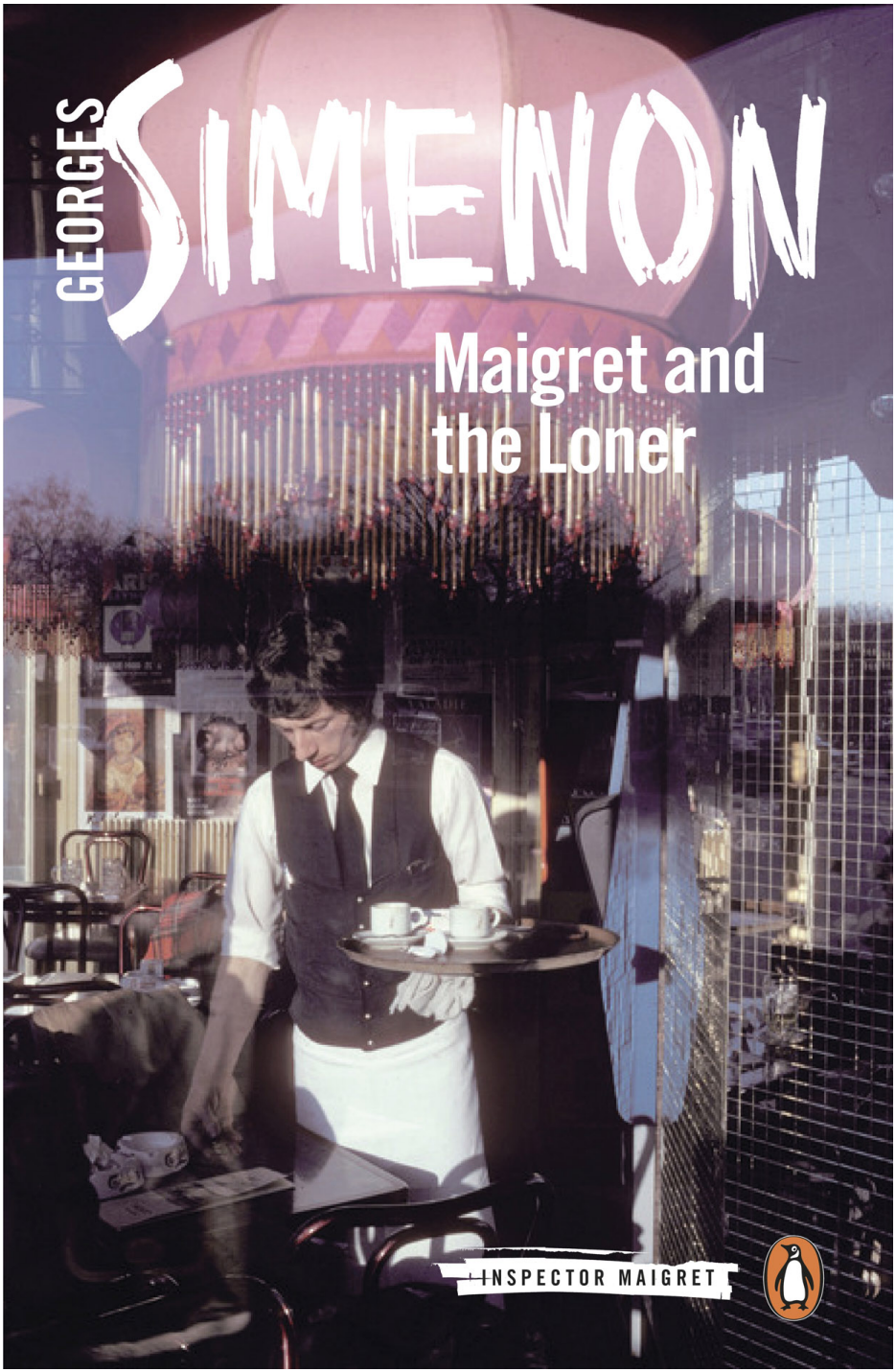
GEORGES
SIMENON
Maigret and the Loner
INSPECTOR MAIGRET

Georges Simenon

MAIGRET AND THE LONER

Translated by HOWARD CURTIS

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About the Author

Georges Simenon was born on 12 February 1903 in Liège, Belgium, and died in 1989 in Lausanne, Switzerland, where he had lived for the latter part of his life. Between 1931 and 1972 he published seventy-five novels and twenty-eight short stories featuring Inspector Maigret.

Simenon always resisted identifying himself with his famous literary character, but acknowledged that they shared an important characteristic:

> My motto, to the extent that I have one, has been noted often enough, and I've always conformed to it. It's the one I've given to old Maigret, who resembles me in certain points … 'understand and judge not'.

Penguin is publishing the entire series of Maigret novels.

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1.

It was only nine in the morning and it was already hot. Maigret, who had taken off his jacket, was lazily going through his mail and occasionally glancing through the window. There was no quiver from the foliage of the trees on Quai des Orfèvres, and the Seine was as flat and smooth as silk.

It was August. Lucas, Lapointe and at least half the inspectors were on holiday. Janvier and Torrence had taken theirs in July, and Maigret was planning to spend much of September in his house in Meung-sur-Loire, which looked like a presbytery.

For nearly a week, every day, late in the afternoon, a brief but violent storm had broken out and rain pattered down, forcing the people in the streets to hurry on, as close to the buildings as possible. It was the end of the heatwave, and it cooled the air for the night.

Paris was empty. Even the street noises were not the same as usual, and there were intervals of near-silence.

What you saw the most were the coaches of all colours and all nationalities, invariably stopping at the same places – Notre Dame, the Louvre, Place de la Concorde, Place de l'Étoile, Sacré-Cœur and, inevitably, the Eiffel Tower – to discharge their loads of tourists.

When you walked in the streets, you were surprised to suddenly hear French being spoken.

The commissioner was on holiday, too, which meant that the chore of the daily briefing had been dispensed with. There wasn't much mail, and purse snatching was the most common crime.

The ringing of the telephone startled Maigret out of his lethargy. He picked up the receiver.

'The chief inspector from the first arrondissement is on the line. He wants to speak to you personally. Shall I put him through?'

'Please do.'

Maigret knew him well. He was a somewhat affected man, always immaculately dressed – a highly cultivated man, too, who had been a lawyer for several years before joining the police.

'Hello, Ascan.'

'I hope I'm not disturbing you.'

'I have all the time in the world.'

'I'm calling you because I thought the case I was landed with this morning might interest you.'

'What is it?'

'A murder. But not an ordinary murder. It'd take too long to explain. When will you be free?'

'I'm free now.'

'I hope you don't mind my asking you to meet me in my office. This thing happened in an almost unknown dead-end street on the edge of Les Halles.'

It was 1965, and Les Halles, Paris' central food market, had not yet been transferred to Rungis.

'I'll be at the station in a few minutes.'

He indulged in a few grunts, like a man who is being disturbed, but the fact was, he wasn't upset to get away for a while from the routine of the last few days. He went into the inspectors' room. Usually, he would have taken Janvier with him but he needed somebody he could trust, somebody who could take the initiative, to stay at Quai des Orfèvres in his absence.

'Come with me, Torrence. Take one of the cars in the courtyard.'

The police station of the first arrondissement wasn't far, in Rue des Prouvaires. Maigret went straight to Chief Inspector Ascan's office.

'You're about to see one of the most appalling sights I've ever witnessed. I'd rather not say too much in advance … Ah, Torrence! … It's best to leave the car here. It's only round the corner.'

They walked round the outside of the market, from which, in this heat, the smell was very strong, and which wasn't closed, even though it was August. They passed through narrow little streets lined with shops and rooming houses of varying degrees of seediness. There were a few tramps about, including a completely drunk woman holding on to the walls in order not to fall.

'This way …'

They came to Rue de la Grande-Truanderie, and Ascan plunged into a dead-end street so narrow that a lorry wouldn't have been able to get through it.

‘Impasse du Vieux-Four,’ he announced.

There were no more than ten or so old buildings, and, halfway along, a gap left by one that had already been demolished. The others were also due for demolition and had been cleared of occupants.

Timber supports had been put up against some of them in order to stop the walls collapsing.

The one outside which Ascan stopped had lost its windowpanes, and part of the frames had also been removed. The front door had been replaced with planks, and Ascan pulled away two of them from which the nails had been removed. Behind it they found a wide corridor.

‘Be careful on the stairs. There are steps missing and the ones that are left aren’t very stable.’

There was a smell of dust and decay, in addition to the lingering odour from Les Halles.

They climbed three floors. A boy of about twelve sitting against the cracked wall sprang to his feet, bright-eyed, when he saw the three men coming.

‘You’re Inspector Maigret, aren’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘If anyone had told me I’d see you in the flesh one day … I have a scrapbook of all the photographs of you they publish in the papers.’

‘This is young Nicolier,’ Ascan explained. ‘Your first name is Jean, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, monsieur.’

‘His father’s a butcher in Rue Saint-Denis. The only one in the neighbourhood not to have closed in August. Tell us your story, Jean.’

‘It happened just like I said. Most of my friends are at the seaside. I can’t play on my own, so I wander around. I look for places I don’t know, even though I was born around here. This morning, I noticed this building. I tried to move the planks across the door and realized they weren’t nailed on. I walked in. I called out, “Is anyone here?” And my voice just echoed. I wasn’t looking for anything. I kept going, just to see what there was. I pushed open that broken door you see there on the right, and that was where I found the man. I ran downstairs and rushed to the police station. By the time I got there, I was out of breath … Do I have to go back into that room?’

‘I don’t think that’ll be necessary.’

‘Shall I stay here?’

‘Yes.’

It was Maigret who opened the door, which was so rotten it wasn’t

even good for making firewood. He stopped in the doorway and realized why Ascan had wanted to surprise him.

The room was quite large, and in the two windows the panes had been replaced with cardboard and thick paper. The uneven floor, with gaps several centimetres wide between the boards, was cluttered with an incredible jumble of totally useless objects, most of them broken.

What particularly drew the eye was a man lying fully dressed and obviously dead on an iron bedstead covered with an old straw mattress. His chest was covered in caked blood, but his face had retained a serene expression.

The clothes were those of a tramp, in marked contrast to the dead man's face and hands. He was quite old and had long silvery hair with bluish streaks. His eyes, too, were blue, but their fixed stare made Maigret uncomfortable, and Ascan closed them.

He had a white moustache which was slightly turned up at the ends and an equally white Richelieu-style goatee beard.

Apart from that, he was clean-shaven, and Maigret had another surprise on discovering that the dead man's hands had been carefully manicured.

'He looks like an old actor playing the part of a tramp,' he murmured. 'Did he have any papers on him?'

'No, nothing. No identity card. No old letters. My inspectors who know the neighbourhood came and had a look at him. None of them recognized him. Just one thinks he may have spotted him going through the dustbins.'

The man was very tall and exceptionally well built. His trousers were too short for him and had a hole in the left knee. An old jacket, a real rag, lay on the dusty floor.

'Has the pathologist been?'

'Not yet. I'm expecting him any minute. I wanted you to be here before anything was touched.'

'Torrence, phone from the nearest bistro and ask for the men from Criminal Records to get here as soon as possible. Also ask for the prosecutor's office to be informed.'

That face on the warped iron bedstead continued to fascinate him. The moustache and beard had been trimmed with care, and there was every sign that this had been done the previous day at the latest. As for the well-tended hands with their polished nails, it was hard to see them sifting through rubbish bins.

And yet the man must have been doing that for a long time now. The

whole room was cluttered with the most unexpected objects. Broken, almost all of them. An old coffee grinder. Badly chipped enamel jugs, buckets with dents or holes, a kerosene lamp without a wick and without kerosene, unmatched shoes.

'I'll have to make an inventory of all this.'

There was a wash-basin on the wall, and Maigret went and tried the tap. As he had expected, the water had been cut off. So had the electricity and the gas, as in all these buildings marked down for demolition.

For how long had the man been living here? Long enough to have accumulated all these old things. It was impossible to question the concierge and the neighbours, since there weren't any. Ascan went back out on the landing and spoke to young Nicolier.

'Do you want to make yourself useful? Wait downstairs in the street and when a group of gentlemen arrive, which'll be in a few minutes, bring them up here.'

'Yes, monsieur.'

'Don't forget to point out the steps that are missing.'

Maigret was coming and going, touching some of the objects, which was how he discovered a candle end and a box of matches. The candle had been stuck to the bottom of a chipped cup.

It was the first time in his career that he had seen a sight like this, and the surprises kept coming.

'How was he killed?'

'From several bullets in the chest and the belly.'

'High calibre?'

'Medium. Probably .32.'

'Is there anything in the pockets of his jacket?'

He could imagine the disgust with which the elegant, fastidious Ascan had searched these grubby rags.

'A button, some pieces of string, a crust of stale bread …'

'No money?'

'Two twenty-five-centime coins.'

'And in the trouser pockets?'

'A dirty cloth he must have used as a handkerchief and a few cigarette ends in a tin of cough drops.'

'No wallet?'

'No.'

Even the tramps on the riverbanks, who slept under the bridges, had papers in their pockets, even if it was just an identity card.

Torrence, who had returned, was no less dumbfounded than Maigret.

'They're just coming.'

And, indeed, Moers and his men from Criminal Records were following young Nicolier up the stairs. They looked around them in amazement.

'Murder?'

'Yes. There's no way it could be suicide, there's no weapon in the room.'

'Where should we start?'

'With his fingerprints. We need to identify him before anything else.'

'It's a pity to spoil such well-tended hands.'

They took the prints all the same.

'Photographs?'

'Of course.'

'Well, well, what a good-looking man, he must have been quite a strong fellow.'

The next thing they heard were the cautious footsteps of the deputy prosecutor, Examining Magistrate Cassure and the court clerk. All three were looking in amazement at the sight offered by the room.

'When was he killed?' the deputy prosecutor asked.

'We'll soon know, here's Dr Lagodinec.'

The doctor was young and lively. He shook hands with Maigret, nodded to the others and walked over to the bed with its twisted feet. Another piece of junk the man had found in the street or on a patch of waste ground.

'Have you identified him?'

'No.'

They were looking anxiously at the floor: now that there were so many of them in the room, it was moving so much there was a likelihood it could collapse.

'We might end up on the floor below,' the young doctor remarked.

He waited until photographs had been taken before he approached the body and began his examination. The chest was uncovered, and they saw the black holes made by the bullets.

'Three shots were fired, from less than a metre away. The murderer aimed carefully, and it's likely his victim was asleep, or the bullets wouldn't have been so close together.'

'Was death instantaneous?'

'Yes. The left ventricle was hit.'

'Do you think the bullets went through the body?'

‘I’ll tell you that when I’ve turned him over.’

One of the two photographers helped him. Only one of the bullets had gone right through the strange tramp’s chest and would probably be found in the straw mattress.

‘Is there water in the room?’

‘No. It’s been cut off.’

‘I wonder where he washed himself so carefully. His body’s clean.’

‘Can you establish the approximate time of death?’

‘Between seven and eleven p.m. I’m sure I’ll be a bit more precise when I’ve done the post-mortem. Has he been identified?’

‘Not yet. We’ll be giving his photograph to the papers … By the way, when will we have the first photographs?’

‘In an hour, is that OK?’

The photographer left. The other technicians searched for fingerprints on all the objects.

‘I assume you don’t need me any more?’ the deputy prosecutor said.

‘Or me?’ Examining Magistrate Cassure added.

Maigret was slowly smoking his pipe with a distracted air. It took him a few seconds to realize they had been talking to him.

‘No. I’ll keep you informed.’

And to the pathologist:

‘Do you think he was drunk?’

‘I’d be surprised if he was. The stomach contents will tell us for sure. But at first sight, I don’t think this man was a drinker.’

‘A tramp who doesn’t drink,’ Ascan said. ‘That’s quite rare.’

‘What if he wasn’t a tramp?’ Torrence said.

But Maigret said nothing. It was as if his eyes were somehow photographing every last object and tiny detail of the room. Less than a quarter of an hour had gone by, and the technicians were still at work when a van from the Forensic Institute drew up in the street. Young Nicolier went down to show the stretcher bearers the way.

‘You can take him away, yes.’

Again the man was seen face up, with his aristocratic head and his well-trimmed goatee.

‘God, he’s heavy!’ one of the carriers said.

It wasn’t easy for them to get down the stairs with their load, because of the missing steps.

Maigret called the boy over.

‘Tell me, young man, is there a hairdressing school in the neighbourhood?’

‘Yes, Monsieur Maigret. In Rue Saint-Denis, three doors down from our shop.’

More than ten years earlier, on the hunt for a criminal, Maigret had been called to one of these hairdressing schools. There were presumably more luxurious ones in Paris, but you couldn’t expect first-class premises around Les Halles.

It was quite likely that the one in Rue Saint-Denis, like the others, called on tramps and beggars to endure the clumsy efforts of their novice pupils. Both men and women attended these schools, including aspiring manicurists.

But before going there, Maigret needed the photographs. For the moment, all he could do was wait for what the fingerprints showed.

He left Moers and two of his men to continue their work in the room and walked back downstairs with Torrence and Ascan. It was a relief to breathe the relatively clean air of the cul-de-sac.

‘Why do you think he was killed?’

‘I don’t have the slightest idea.’

There was a courtyard, through the entrance arch. It was cluttered with old crates and refuse but it did reveal to Maigret the answer to one of the pathologist’s questions. Against one of the walls was a pump, with a bucket in a fairly good state next to it on the cobbles. He tried the pump. Nothing happened at first, but then it started up, and the water began flowing.

Wasn’t it here that the unknown man washed? Maigret could picture him, bare-chested, splashing water on himself.

He took his leave of Ascan and headed for Rue de la Grande-Truanderie, then to Les Halles. It was getting hotter and hotter, and he took advantage of the fact that he needed to make a telephone call to go into a bistro that looked decent enough and order a draught beer. Torrence did the same.

‘Put me through to Criminal Records.’

Then he asked for Inspector Lebel, who had been dealing with the man’s fingerprints.

‘Hello, Lebel? Did you have time to check in the records?’

‘I’ve just been doing that. There are no prints matching the dead man’s.’

Another anomaly. Most tramps have been in trouble with the law at some time in their lives.

‘Thanks. Do you know if the photographs are ready?’

‘They will be in ten minutes … Ten minutes, Mestral?’

‘Let’s say fifteen.’

The headquarters of the Police Judiciaire at Quai des Orfèvres wasn’t far, and it took the two men only a few minutes to get there. Maigret went upstairs to the laboratory, where he had to wait for the photographs to dry. He had left Torrence in the inspectors’ room.

He took three copies of each of the photographs, went back down to the Police Judiciaire offices and gave Inspector Lourtie the task of taking them to the newspapers, especially those that come out in the afternoon.

‘Come, Torrence. We still have an hour before lunch, let’s do the door-to-door.’

Maigret passed a set of photographs to Torrence.

‘Show them to the owners of shops and little bars around Les Halles. We’ll meet back at the car.’

He himself headed for Rue Saint-Denis. It was narrow and still bustling despite the holidays, the working-class locals not being the kind you see often at the seaside.

Maigret checked the numbers. The one he had been given corresponded to a seed merchant’s shop. To the left of the window was an alley leading to a courtyard. Halfway along it was the bottom of a staircase, and two enamel nameplates were fixed to a wall that had once been painted green but had become an indefinable hue.

Joseph
School of hairdressing and manicure

And an arrow pointed to the staircase, beside the word ‘Mezzanine’.

Immediately below was another nameplate:

Madame Cordier
Artificial Flowers

Here, too, an arrow pointed to the staircase, but was accompanied by the words ‘Second Floor’.

Maigret mopped his brow, walked up to the mezzanine, opened a door and found himself in quite a large room barely lit by two half-windows. What dim light there was came from tarnished globes hanging from the ceiling.

There were two rows of chairs, apparently one for men and the other for women. Young trainees, male and female, were moving about under the direction of older men, and a small, thin, almost bald character, his

moustache dyed an inky black, supervised all of them.

'I assume you're in charge here?'

'I'm Monsieur Joseph, yes.'

He could have been sixty, he could have been seventy-five. Maigret looked mechanically at the men and women sitting in the chairs, which had definitely been bought second-hand. It was like being at the Salvation Army, or under the bridges, seeing that it was only tramps on whom the young people were exercising their combs, scissors and razors. It was all quite impressive, especially in the dim light. Because of the heat, the two half-windows were open, letting the street noises in, which made the atmosphere of the school even more unreal.

Before Monsieur Joseph could lose patience, Maigret took the photographs from his pocket and held them out to the little man.

'What am I supposed to do with these?'

'Look at them, then tell me if you recognize him.'

'What has he done? You're police, aren't you?'

He was visibly mistrustful.

'Detective Chief Inspector Maigret, Police Judiciaire.'

This didn't impress Monsieur Joseph.

'Are you looking for him?'

'No. Unfortunately, we've found him. He'd been shot three times in the chest.'

'Where did this happen?'

'At home. If we can call it that. Do you know where he lived?'

'No.'

'He'd moved into a building that was due for demolition. A young boy who was wandering in the building found him and alerted the local police. Do you recognize him?'

'Yes … We all called him His Lordship.'

'Did he come here often?'

'It varied. Sometimes we didn't see him for a whole month, then for a few weeks he'd come two or three times a week.'

'Do you know his name?'

'No.'

'Not even his first name?'

'No.'

'Did he talk much?'

'He didn't talk at all. He'd sit down in the first chair he found, half close his eyes and let us do whatever we wanted. I was the one who asked him to let his moustache and goatee beard grow. They're coming

back into fashion, and young hairdressers have to learn how to cut them, which is harder than you might think.'

'How long ago was this?'

'Three or four months.'

'Before that, he was clean-shaven?'

'Yes. He had wonderful hair, the kind you can do anything you like with.'

'Had he been coming here long?'

'Three or four years.'

'You only use tramps, I see.'

'Almost exclusively. They know that at the end of the morning or afternoon I'll give them each a five-franc coin.'

'Did you give him five francs, too?'

'Of course.'

'Did he know any of your regulars?'

'I never saw him talk to any of them, and whenever anyone talked to him he pretended not to hear.'

It was nearly midday. The scissors were clattering more quickly now. In a few minutes, there would be a stampede to get out, just like in school.

'Do you live locally?'

'I live with my wife on the first floor of this building, just above where we are now.'

'Have you ever bumped into him in the street?'

'I don't think so. If it did happen, I didn't notice … Now if you'll excuse me, it's time …'

He went and pressed a button, then sat down behind a kind of counter, in front of which a queue formed.

Maigret slowly went back downstairs. After so many years in the Police Judiciaire, including stints on the beat and in the railway police, he thought he knew all the Parisian fauna. But he did not recall having ever met a man like the one who had been nicknamed His Lordship.

He walked slowly back to the car, which was parked on the corner of Rue Rambuteau. Torrence got there almost at the same time, mopping the sweat from his brow.

'Did you find anything?'

'First of all, the baker's in Rue du Cygne, where he bought his bread.'

'Did he go there every day?'

'Pretty much. Most often late in the morning.'

'Do they know anything about him there?'

‘No, nothing. He barely opened his mouth to place his order.’

‘Did he ever buy anything else?’

‘Not there. But in Rue Coquillière he’d buy slices of sausage, or a saveloy. On one corner of the street there’s an open-air fries stall that also sells hot sausages, especially at night. He’d sometimes buy a bag of fries and a sausage about three in the morning. I also showed the photographs in two or three bistros. They did see him, but not very often, and then he’d only order a coffee. He never drank wine or spirits.’

The picture of this man was growing increasingly strange. His Lordship, to use the name Monsieur Joseph had given him, seemed to have had no contact with other human beings. Apparently he worked in Les Halles at night, whenever they hired him to unload a lorry of vegetables or fruit.

‘I have to telephone the Forensic Institute,’ Maigret said, remembering.

That gave him the opportunity to have his second beer of the morning.

‘Could you put me through to Dr Lagodinec, please?’

‘Hold on, I’ll call him back. He’s just on his way out.’

‘Hello, Lagodinec? Maigret here. I don’t suppose you’ve done the post-mortem yet?’

‘I’m doing it first thing this afternoon.’

‘Could you make sure you don’t spoil the face? I’m going to need more photographs.’

‘That’s easy. When will you send the photographer?’

‘Tomorrow morning, along with a hairdresser.’

‘What will he do to him?’

‘Shave off his moustache and beard.’

Torrence dropped Maigret off in Boulevard Richard-Lenoir, opposite his apartment.

‘Shall I carry on this afternoon?’ he asked.

‘Yes.’

‘In the same neighbourhood?’

‘Maybe try the riverbank, too. He may have slept there at some time.’

Madame Maigret could see immediately that he was worried and pretended not to notice.

‘Are you hungry?’

‘Not very.’

He was the one who wanted to talk about his morning.

‘I’ve just encountered one of the most surprising characters

imaginable.'

'A criminal?'

'No. A victim. The man's dead. He'd set up home in an empty building that had been marked for demolition for years. He only used one room that was still more or less inhabitable and in it he put together the most incongruous collection of objects found in dustbins and on waste ground.'

'A tramp, in other words.'

'Except that he looked quite aristocratic.'

He told her about the hairdressing school and showed her the photographs.

'Of course, it's hard to judge from the photographs of a dead man.'

'But surely people in the neighbourhood must know him?'

'Nobody knows his name, not even his first name. At the hairdressing school, they called him His Lordship … Photographs will appear in the afternoon papers … Maybe some of the readers will recognize him.'

True to his word, he ate without much appetite. He didn't like it when he couldn't understand, and right now he understood nothing about that morning's discovery.

By two o'clock, he was sitting in his office. After filling his pipe, he looked through his mail. When he was shown the newspapers, he saw that two of them had put the photograph on the front page.

'Do you know this man?' one asked.

The other had the headline: 'A dead man with no name'.

There were reporters in the corridor, and Maigret let them in. He had almost nothing to tell them except that he was making every effort to identify the man found in Impasse du Vieux-Four.

'Could he have committed suicide?'

'There was no weapon in the room or anywhere in the building.'

'Can we go there and take photographs?'

'The body's not there any more, of course.'

'Just to capture the atmosphere.'

'If you like. There's an officer guarding the door. Tell him you have my permission.'

'You seem worried.'

'I'm trying to understand, and I hope that'll happen quite soon. This time, I'm not keeping anything under wraps. I've told you all I know. The more it's talked about, the better.'

About four o'clock, they started to receive telephone calls. Some came from practical jokers, others from the kind of fanatics who muscle in on

every case. One young girl asked:

'Does he have a wart on his cheek?'

'No.'

'Then it's not the person I was thinking of.'

Four or five people came to headquarters. Patiently, Maigret admitted them and showed them the various photographs.

'Do you recognize him?'

'He looks a little bit like an uncle of mine who's already run away several times … But no, it's not him. This man was tall, wasn't he?'

'About one metre eighty.'

'My uncle was very short and very thin.'

For the first time that week, the storm didn't break, and the air was stifling.

At about five, Torrence got back.

'Find anything?'

'Nothing much … An old tramp under Pont-Marie vaguely remembers our man but I don't know how far we can trust him … Apparently, several years ago, the unknown man used to sleep under the bridges … He wasn't very sociable … They suspected that he spent part of his nights in Les Halles, but that was all they knew about him.'

'No name, no nickname even?'

'One nickname, yes: the Quiet One.'

'Nothing else?'

'From time to time he'd buy a candle.'

At last, at six o'clock, he received some more specific information. It was Dr Lagodinec calling him after performing the post-mortem.

'I'll send you my report tomorrow morning but I can tell you roughly what I know. In my opinion, the man isn't as old as he seems. How old would you say he was, Maigret?'

'Sixty-five? Seventy?'

'Judging by the state of his organs and arteries, he's fifty-five at the most.'

'He obviously had a hard life. What did you find in his stomach?'

'Let me tell you first of all that he was killed between two and five in the morning, closer to three than to five. His last meal, which was half digested, consisted of sausage and fries. He must have eaten around two o'clock, just before going home to bed.'

'And the killer took advantage of his being asleep to—'

'To do what?' the doctor objected. 'It may have been someone he trusted, someone he didn't have any suspicion of.'

‘I find it hard to see him trusting anyone that much. Did he have any diseases?’

‘No. No infirmities either. He was a strong man, very tough.’

‘Thanks, doctor. I’ll wait for your report. If you like, I can send someone for it tomorrow morning.’

‘Not before nine, please.’

‘Nine is fine by me.’

What had most struck Maigret was His Lordship’s age. He seemed to have been a tramp for several years, perhaps many years, and tramps are generally older. They also tend to become quite close. From one end of the riverbanks of Paris, upriver, to the other end, downriver, they all knew each other, more or less, and a newcomer would immediately arouse curiosity among the veterans.

‘What else did you find, Torrence?’

‘That’s pretty much it. Apart from the old man under Pont-Marie, the others don’t remember him. And yet there are some who’ve been tramps for more than ten years … I went to the tobacconist’s closest to where he lived. He sometimes bought matches there.’

‘What about cigarettes?’

‘No. As far as cigarettes went, he’d just pick up cigarette ends from the pavement.’

The telephone rang.

‘Hello? Monsieur Maigret?’

It was a woman’s voice, still young from the sound of her.

‘Yes … Who am I speaking to?’

‘My name wouldn’t mean anything to you … Did the man whose body you found this morning have a scar on his scalp?’

‘To be honest, I don’t know. If he does have one, I hope the pathologist will mention it in his report, which I’m expecting tomorrow morning.’

‘Do you have any idea who he might be?’

‘No, not yet.’

‘I’ll phone you tomorrow during the day.’

She hung up without saying anything more. It suddenly struck Maigret that he didn’t need to wait until the next day to have an answer to the young woman’s question. He called the hairdressing school. It was Monsieur Joseph who answered.

‘Maigret here. There’s a question I forgot to ask you this morning. Did you ever do His Lordship’s hair yourself?’

‘To show some pupils, yes.’

‘Did you notice a scar on his scalp?’

‘Yes. I didn’t dare ask him what kind of accident he’d had.’

‘A large scar?’

‘About six centimetres long. It hadn’t been stitched up, which meant the scar was quite wide.’

‘Was it noticeable through his hair?’

‘Not when his hair had been done. He had a wonderful head of hair, as I think I told you.’

‘Thank you very much.’

So a first contact had been established, at least for a few moments. Somewhere in Paris there was a young woman who had known His Lordship, given that she knew about his scar. She had been careful to hang up before Maigret could ask her any questions. Would she call back the next day as she had said?

Maigret was impatient. He couldn’t wait to put a name to this unknown man and find out the reason why he had lived as he had.

The heterogeneous collection of objects cluttering the room in Impasse du Vieux-Four suggested a madman or an obsessive. Why gather and put together things he could never sell and which were of no use to him?

Maigret couldn’t accept the idea that the man was mad.

The telephone rang again. Since the publication of the photographs Maigret had been expecting it, and it was what he wanted.

‘Hello? Inspector Maigret?’

‘Yes. Who am I speaking to?’

Like his earlier caller, this one, also a woman but clearly not young, did not answer him but, as if by chance, she asked the same question.

‘Does he have a scar on the top of his skull?’

‘Do you know someone like that who looks like him?’

Silence at the other end of the line.

‘Why don’t you answer?’

‘You haven’t answered my question either.’

‘He does have a scar, about six centimetres long, on the upper part of his head.’

‘Thank you.’

She, too, hung up, just like the first woman. So there were two women who had known His Lordship but weren’t in communication with each other – if they were, a single telephone call would have sufficed.

How to track them down in a population of five million? And why were they both determined to remain anonymous?

It put Maigret in a bad mood, and he left the Police Judiciaire muttering to himself. And yet he had learned something: his loner hadn't always been quite such a loner.

Two women had known him. Two women remembered him but didn't want to be questioned.

Why?

It was a little cooler now, even though the storm hadn't broken. A light wind had sprung up, pushing little pink clouds across the sky as if in an opera set.

He indulged in a glass of beer. He had promised Dr Pardon he wouldn't overdo it from now on. But could it be called excessive to drink three glasses of draught beer in a whole day?

He was trying his best to stop thinking about His Lordship. He wondered who could have discovered the strange place where he had sought refuge and why that person had killed him.

He shrugged bad-temperedly. He was wrong, he knew, as in every investigation, to want to know everything immediately. Each time, he would grumble as if fate was being unfair to him.

Then, in the days that followed, the truth came to light. Would that happen this time, too?

He made an effort to whistle as he climbed the stairs of his apartment building.

2.

The following morning, Maigret had shed his bad mood and once again walked from home to Quai des Orfèvres. The municipal sweepers travelled down the almost empty streets in slow motion, leaving behind them wide strips of wetness, and a warm mist rose from the Seine.

He was climbing the staircase to the Police Judiciaire when he saw a photographer waiting, laden with cameras. He knew him well. He was always here when there was a case on. He worked for an agency and often waited hours for something to happen. He had red hair and looked like an overgrown schoolboy. If you threw him out one door, he'd come back in through another or through a window.

His colleagues called him Coco. His name was Marcel Caune.

Just in case, he took a photograph of Maigret on the stairs. It might have been the two hundredth he had taken of him.

'Have you summoned any witnesses?'

'No.'

'There's one waiting in the corridor.'

'First I've heard of it.'

There was indeed a man on a bench. He was very elderly but still held himself erect and stood up briskly.

'Might I have a few words with you, inspector?'

'Is it about what happened in Les Halles?'

'Yes. The murder in Impasse du Vieux-Four.'

'I'll see you in a moment.'

First, as he always did, he popped his head round the door of the inspectors' room. They were all in their shirt-sleeves, and the window was wide open. Torrence was there, glancing though a newspaper whose headline read:

Detective Chief Inspector Maigret on the trail

The truth was, he didn't yet have a trail to follow.

'Anything new, boys?'

'The usual anonymous letters. A couple of letters from madmen, too. Regulars.'

From his office, Maigret telephoned the hairdressing school.

'Monsieur Joseph? … I'd like to ask you a favour … Could you send one of your young people to the Forensic Institute to shave His Lordship's moustache and goatee? Naturally, I'll pay for the work.'

'I'd rather go myself, it's a delicate task.'

He next called Criminal Records and got Moers on the line.

'Is Mestral there?'

'He's just arrived.'

'Could you send him to the Forensic Institute? There, he'll find a barber shaving our unknown man's moustache and beard. As soon as that's been done, I'd like a few good photographs taken from different angles. It's quite urgent.'

He had only just hung up when the telephone rang.

'Hello? Inspector Maigret?'

He thought he recognized the voice.

'I'm the person who called you yesterday about the murder in Les Halles.'

The young voice. Not the other.

'I assume you want to ask me the same question?'

'Yes.'

'You're not the only one.'

'Oh!'

'Another woman called me and said precisely the same thing as you.'

'What did you tell her?'

'I'll tell you if you come and see me or if you give me your name and address.'

'I'd rather not.'

'That's up to you.'

This time, it was Maigret who hung up, muttering:

'Little cow!'

Basically, at least three people knew the identity of His Lordship: the two women who had telephoned about the scar and, of course, the murderer.

Maigret went and opened the door. His visitor, who was short and thin, leaped to his feet and came towards him.

'I was a little afraid you wouldn't see me.'

In the way he walked, held himself and spoke, there was something that struck Maigret, although he didn't know what.

'My name's Émile Hugon and I live in Rue Lepic, in the same apartment my parents were living in when I was born.'

'Please sit down.'

'You may not think so by looking at me, but I'm eighty-five years old.'

He seemed very proud to have reached that age in such good condition.

'I came down here from Montmartre on foot and every day I walk at least two hours.'

Maigret could see there was no point in bombarding him with questions.

'Locally, they call me the Colonel. Not that I was ever a colonel, only a captain … When war broke out in 1914, I was in training as a non-commissioned officer … I was at Verdun and the Chemin des Dames … I got through Verdun unscathed, but on the Chemin des Dames I got a piece of shrapnel in my leg, which still makes me limp … When the second war started, I was too old, they didn't want me.'

He seemed very pleased with himself, and Maigret summoned his patience, hoping the Colonel wasn't going to tell him his whole life story.

Instead of which, the man asked abruptly:

'Have you identified him?'

'Not yet.'

'Unless I'm mistaken, though that would surprise me, his name is Marcel Vivien.'

'Did you know him personally?'

'He had his workshop in the courtyard just below my apartment. Whenever I went out, I'd always go and say hello to him.'

'When was this?'

'Almost immediately after the second war, in 1945.'

'How old was he then?'

'About thirty-five. He was a tall, strong young man, with an intelligent, open face.'

'What was his profession?'

'He was a cabinetmaker. He'd also done classes in decorative arts. His speciality was restoring old furniture. I saw some really excellent furniture there, full of inlay work.'

'Did he live in the same building as you?'

'No. All he had was the glass-fronted workshop. He'd come in the

morning and leave again in the evening.'

'Did he really look like the photograph you saw in the papers?'

'Well, he didn't have a beard or moustache in those days, but I'd swear it's him.'

'Do you know if he was married?'

'Oh, yes. A woman the same age as him who'd sometimes come and meet him when he'd finished for the day. He had a little girl of seven or eight who often came in to say hello to him on her way home from school.'

'When did you last see him?'

'At the end of 1945 or the beginning of 1946. One fine morning, he didn't come to the workshop, or the next day, or the days after that. At first I thought he was ill. Then his wife came. She had the key. She went to the workshop and stayed there for a very long time, as if she was making an inventory.'

'Have you seen her since?'

'She still lives in the neighbourhood and quite often does her shopping at the market in Rue Lepic. For several years, I still saw her daughter in the street. She'd grown up. I assume she got married.'

'What happened to the furniture that was in the workshop?'

'An upholsterer got it. A locksmith eventually took over the space.'

Maigret showed the different photographs he had of the man in Impasse du Vieux-Four. The Colonel inspected them carefully.

'My opinion hasn't changed. I'm almost certain it's him. I retired a long time ago. In the summer, I like to sit on a park bench or a café terrace and watch people passing by. I try to guess what job they do, what kind of life they lead. It's made me observant.'

'As far as you know, did the man ever have an accident?'

'He didn't own a car.'

'There are other kinds of accidents. Did he ever hurt his head?'

The Colonel struck himself on the forehead. 'Yes, of course! It was the middle of summer. Very hot, just as it is now. He was in the courtyard, working on a chair that was missing a leg. I was watching him from my window, and I saw a pot of geraniums fall on his head. Mademoiselle Blanche, the tenant on the third floor, had accidentally knocked it over while watering her flowers. He didn't want to go to hospital, or see a doctor. He disinfected the wound and went to the pharmacy opposite to have it bandaged.'

'Was the scar visible?'

'He wore his hair quite long and very thick, so it was hidden.'

‘Do you remember anything else? Did you ever see him again in the neighbourhood?’

‘No, never.’

‘But you say his wife and daughter still lived there? So they didn’t move out with him.’

‘Precisely.’

‘Do you know if he drank?’

‘Definitely not. Every morning at about ten, he’d close his workshop for a few minutes and go to the little bistro next door for a coffee.’

‘Are there still any tenants in your building who were there in 1945?’

‘Let me think … The concierge … Yes, she’s still the same. Her husband was a policeman, he’s dead now. She’s aged a lot … Mademoiselle Blanche, whom I mentioned, is still alive but she can’t leave her wheelchair. Apparently, she’s no longer in her right mind … On the other floors … The Trabuchets on the third floor. He used to work for the tax office. He’s retired, too. Everyone’s older, of course.’

‘Do you think they’d recognize Marcel Vivien?’

‘It’s possible, but the Trabuchets’ windows look out on the street. They didn’t have the opportunity I had to see what was happening in the courtyard.’

‘Thank you for coming, Monsieur Hugon. I think your statement will be very useful to us. I’ll have one of my inspectors take you to a small office at the end of the corridor. I’d like you to repeat to him what you’ve just told me.’

‘Will I be called as a witness when the case comes to trial?’

He was already quite excited.

‘Hold on! We have to get our hands on the murderer first and establish the identity of the victim.’

Maigret opened the door to the inspectors’ room and chose Lourtie, who was the fastest typist.

He told him what he expected of him, and Lourtie came and took charge of the Colonel.

They seemed to have a lead now. Maigret was waiting for the photographs before going to Rue Lepic. He knew that Mestral was a fast worker and he killed time by going through his mail.

At ten thirty, the photographer was there with a whole batch of proofs in his hand.

‘It makes him look younger, don’t you think?’

‘Yes. Though apparently he wasn’t very old. The pathologist reckons fifty-five at the most. How many copies did you print?’

‘Look, there are five of each pose, if you can use that word talking about a dead man. By the way, that barber of yours was so upset, I expected him to pass out.’

‘Thanks. I’d like you to make some more prints, we need them for all the newspapers.’

Maigret stuffed two copies of each photograph in his pocket and took another, which he gave to Coco, the most stubborn photographer in Paris.

‘Here. We’ve done part of your work for you. These are pictures of our man with his beard off. Your agency can reproduce them and send them to whichever newspapers you choose.’

Maigret also gave two to Leduc, one of the youngest inspectors.

‘Take these to the two main evening papers. We just about have time, they go to press early in the afternoon. Make sure you hand them over to the editor or his secretary.’

Last but not least, he walked to the end of the corridor, where Lourtie was typing up what the Colonel was telling him. As before, the old man sprang to his feet.

‘It’s all right, don’t get up. I just wanted to show you these.’

And he held out the new photographs. From the very first glance, the ex-officer’s face lit up.

‘It’s him. Now I’m sure I wasn’t mistaken. Obviously he’s older here, but that’s definitely Vivien.’

Maigret made a sign to Lourtie to continue and walked back to the inspectors’ room.

‘Get your hat, Torrence.’

‘Are we going far?’

‘Montmartre. Rue Lepic, to be precise.’

He showed Torrence the photographs.

‘I see you had him shaved.’

‘Yes, this morning. I’ve just had a visit from a retired army captain who’s now eighty-five and who claims to recognize him, even though he hasn’t seen him for twenty years.’

‘Who is he?’

‘Apparently a cabinetmaker who used to have his workshop in Rue Lepic and who disappeared overnight.’

‘Twenty years ago?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did he have family?’

‘It seems he had a wife and daughter.’

‘Did they also go missing?’

‘No. They still lived in the neighbourhood for some years.’

They took one of the Police Judiciaire’s little black cars and drove straight to Rue Lepic, which was filled with market stalls selling fruit and vegetables.

65*A* was at the top of the street, on the left.

‘Try to find a parking space and then join me. I’ll probably be with the concierge.’

The concierge was still young and appealing. She looked at Maigret through the glazed door of the lodge. He knocked, and she opened.

‘What can I do for you?’

‘Detective Chief Inspector Maigret, Police Judiciaire.’

‘Is it about one of my tenants?’ she said, surprised.

‘It’s about someone who used to be your tenant.’

‘So I was right.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Yesterday, when I saw the photograph in the paper, I immediately thought of Monsieur Vivien. I even told the dairywoman, but then I said, “It can’t possibly be him. Such a nice young man, so hard-working. I can’t believe he ended up as a tramp.”’

Maigret showed her the new photographs just as Torrence came into the lodge.

‘One of my inspectors … Take a good look at these photographs.’

‘Oh, I don’t need to look too long. It’s him. What confused me a bit yesterday was the moustache and beard. You’ve had him shaved.’

She added, staring at the photographs:

‘I’m still flabbergasted.’

‘Do you remember the way he left here? Did he give notice? Did he send back to his customers the items of furniture he was working on?’

‘It wasn’t like that at all. He just didn’t show up one day, and nobody around here ever saw him again.’

‘Wasn’t he reported missing?’

‘I don’t know if his wife did that. She didn’t often come to see him during the day. His daughter, yes, almost every day. She’d drop by and say hello. They lived not far from here, in Rue Caulaincourt, I don’t know the number, but it was next door to a dry cleaner’s.’

‘Have you seen his wife since?’

‘Quite often, in the market. She still does her shopping in Rue Lepic. Her hair’s grey now and she’s very thin. She used to be quite plump.’

‘Have you ever spoken to her?’

‘She looked at me a few times but didn’t seem to recognize me.’

‘Is it a long time since you last saw her?’

‘A good few months. Maybe a year.’

‘And what about the girl? She must be twenty-eight by now.’

‘Somebody told me, I can’t remember who, that she was married with children.’

‘Does she live in Montmartre?’

‘Apparently. I don’t know where.’

‘Could I have a look at the workshop?’

‘Just go along the corridor and open the door to the courtyard. Monsieur Benoît the locksmith works there now.’

He was a very affable man in his thirties.

‘How can I help you?’

Maigret told him who he was.

‘I assume you’re here because of the man who was shot three times in the chest? They were talking about it this morning in the bistro where I have a drink every day.’

‘Did you know him?’

‘Of course not. I was ten when he left here. An upholsterer took his place. He was here for about fifteen years. He wasn’t all that young any more and decided to retire to the country. That’s when I rented the workshop.’

‘Did anyone ever come and ask you for information about Marcel Vivien?’

‘No, nobody. But, since yesterday, people who’ve been here a long time have been talking about him. This morning, when I was having my coffee and croissants, it was all they were talking about. The old folks, even the middle-aged people, remember him and can’t understand how he could have become a tramp. Apparently he was a good-looking man, tall and strong, who had a good trade and made a very decent living. And yet he vanished overnight without saying a word to anyone.’

‘Not even to his wife?’

‘So they say. I don’t know if it’s true. I’m just repeating what I heard. They say he’d been missing for several days, maybe even a week, before she came here to ask after him. That’s all I know, but if you want to hear people talk about him, just go to the bistro next door.’

‘Thank you.’

He and Torrence went back out into Rue Lepic. The identity of the dead man was becoming clearer. They both went into the little bar next door. It was obvious from the start that all those at the counter, which

was still of the old-fashioned kind, were regulars.

'What can I get you?'

'A beer.'

'Me, too,' Torrence said.

A pleasant smell of fruit and vegetables filled the air, wafting in from the barrows lined up along the pavement.

The owner served them.

'Aren't you Inspector Maigret?'

'Yes, I am.'

'I assume you're here about the man whose picture was in the papers yesterday afternoon.'

Now everyone was looking at them and it was just a question of who would be the first to speak.

In the event it was a powerful-looking man with huge arms in a white, bloodstained apron, a butcher, who spoke first.

'Who's to say he didn't run off with some young thing, and then, when she dumped him, he couldn't face going back to his old lady? I had an assistant for almost ten years. He was the quietest boy you could imagine. All the same, one morning he vanished without saying a word. He'd run off with an eighteen-year-old girl. He was forty-five. Two years later, we heard he'd shown up at the unemployment office in Strasbourg.'

The others nodded in approval. This was a typical bistro in a densely populated neighbourhood. Most of those who were here were artisans, small shopkeepers and retired men who popped in for a quick drink in the middle of the morning.

'Is there anyone here who saw him again after he disappeared?'

They all looked at each other.

A thin man in a leather apron conveyed the general opinion.

'He wasn't stupid enough to come back to the neighbourhood.'

'Did you know his wife?'

'No. I don't even know where he lived. I only ever met him here, when he'd come in for his coffee. He wasn't a big talker.'

'You mean he was stuck-up?'

'No, not stuck-up. He just didn't like talking.'

Maigret drank his beer. The first of the day. He was keeping count. When he saw Pardon again, he would quote figures to him, not without pride. Admittedly, when it came to tobacco, his record wasn't so impressive, and he still smoked as many pipes a day as before. They

couldn't take away all his pleasures just because he was nearing fifty-five.

'I think I bumped into him in Rue de la Cossonnerie one day, but his hair was all white, and he was dressed like a beggar. I told myself it couldn't be him and I went on my way.'

This was said by a little old man drinking an aperitif of a brand that had been fashionable forty years earlier but that nobody ordered these days.

'How long ago was this?'

'Maybe three months? No, more, spring was late this year and hadn't started yet.'

'Thank you very much, gentlemen.'

'Don't mention it. At your service. I hope you get your hands on the lowlife who shot him in the belly.'

They set off for Rue Caulaincourt. Would they ring every doorbell and question every concierge to track down Vivien's wife, assuming she still lived in the neighbourhood?

Maigret couldn't face it in this heat, and he headed for the local police station in Rue Lambert.

He had once known a man who had vanished in similar circumstances to Vivien, although it was hard to know if it was for the same reasons.

He was a Parisian industrialist, well-to-do, without any apparent problems. He was over fifty, with a wife and two children, including a twenty-one-year-old son who was studying at university. As for his daughter, who was three years younger, no one had a bad word to say about her.

One morning, he had left at his usual time for his factory in Levallois. He drove himself. That was the last anyone had heard of him for several years.

His car had been found not far from Rue du Temple. He didn't have a mistress, as far as anyone was aware. His doctor stated that he had no serious illness and could expect to live many more years.

The police had looked everywhere, except where he actually was. The reality was that overnight he had chosen to become a tramp. He had sold his clothes to a second-hand dealer in Rue des Blancs-Manteaux and swapped them for what were basically rags. From that point on, he had stopped shaving.

Three years later, one of his suppliers had recognized him in Nice, his face hidden beneath a thick beard. He was selling newspapers on café terraces. The supplier had seen fit to inform the police and telephone his

wife. But, although they had combed the city, they hadn't found him. Maigret often thought about him.

'You should stop searching for him, madame. You know now that he's alive and well. He's chosen to live the life he liked.'

'Are you telling me he deliberately became a tramp?'

She hadn't understood. The man had kept his identity card, and they had been able to inform his family when he had died, fifteen years later, in the old quarter of Marseille, which still existed at the time.

'Hello, Dubois,' Maigret said to the officer behind the counter.

Miraculously, or because of the season, the station was empty.

'The chief has just gone out, but he'll be back soon.'

'I'm not here to see him. I'd just like you to look in your registers and tell me if a Madame Vivien, Madame Marcel Vivien, is still living in the neighbourhood.'

'Do you have her last known address?'

'It's in Rue Caulaincourt, but I don't know the number.'

'Recently?'

'No. She was there twenty years ago.'

The officer opened several large black books and ran his forefinger down some of the pages.

After a quarter of an hour, he had found it.

'Is her first name Gabrielle?'

'That's right.'

'She's still registered at 67, Rue Caulaincourt.'

'Thanks, Dubois. You've saved me at least an hour's door-to-door. Rue Caulaincourt's a long street.'

The two men took the car, even though they only had 300 metres to go. Number 67 was quite close to Place Constantin-Pecqueur.

'Shall I come in with you?'

'It's best if I'm alone. Two of us might alarm her.'

'I'll wait for you at Manière's.'

The famous brasserie was just along the street. Maigret knocked at the door of the concierge's lodge, where he could see a fairly young woman arranging fruit on a dish.

'Come in.'

He opened the door.

'How can I help you?'

'I need to know if Madame Vivien still lives here.'

'Yes, on the fourth floor.'

'Is it the same apartment she was living in when her husband was still

around?'

'I wasn't concierge then. I was too young. But I think she changed floors to have a smaller apartment: two rooms and a kitchen, looking out on the courtyard.'

'Do you know if she's in?'

'It's quite likely she is. She only goes out early in the morning, to do her shopping. And even then not every day.'

Maigret headed for the narrow lift. The concierge caught up with him to say:

'It's the door on the left.'

'Thank you.'

Maigret was more impatient than ever. He had the impression he was reaching his goal, that in a few minutes, he would know everything about the man in Impasse du Vieux-Four.

He pressed a button and heard a bell ringing behind the door. Then the door opened, and a hard-faced middle-aged woman looked at him with a frown.

'Madame Vivien?'

'What do you want? Are you a reporter?'

'No. I'm Detective Chief Inspector Maigret of the Police Judiciaire, and I think you phoned me yesterday.'

She didn't say either yes or no and didn't invite him to enter. They looked at each other without coming to a decision, and it was Maigret who at last made up his mind to push the door open and walk into the hall.

'I have nothing to say,' she said, as if her mind, too, was made up.

'All I ask is for you to answer a few questions.'

A door was open, the door to a kind of sitting room that served rather as a dressmaker's workshop. The sewing machine was on a little table, and the big table was covered in unfinished dresses.

'You've become a dressmaker, I see.'

'We all have to earn a living.'

The chairs were as cluttered as the table, and Maigret remained standing. The woman did not sit down either.

What was most striking about her was the hardness of her face, the stiffness of her body. You sensed that she had suffered a lot and had become somehow frozen, withdrawn.

She must have been pretty once, must have dressed in bright colours, but now she seemed unconcerned about her appearance.

'Two people, two women, phoned me yesterday. They both asked me

the same question and then immediately hung up as if they didn't want to be identified. I assume the second one was your daughter.'

She didn't reply.

'Is she married? Does she have children?'

'What business is that of yours? Can't we be left in peace? If this goes on, we'll be getting reporters and photographers soon.'

'I can promise you I won't give them your address.'

She shrugged, as if she were resigned.

'Your husband has been identified by several people. There's no doubt about it now. Did you know what had become of him?'

'No.'

'What did he tell you when he left twenty years ago?'

'Nothing.'

'Did you notice anything different about him before he left?'

He had the impression she shuddered at this, but he wasn't sure.

'He was the same as usual.'

'Were you and he on good terms?'

'I was his wife.'

'We sometimes see a husband and wife who constantly quarrel and make each other's life difficult.'

'That wasn't the case with us.'

'Did he ever go out alone in the evenings?'

'No. Whenever he went out, I went with him.'

'What kinds of places did you go?'

'To the cinema. Or else we'd go for a walk in the neighbourhood.'

'In the days before he left, did he seem worried?'

'No.'

Maigret had the impression she was lying, and that was the reason she was mostly answering in monosyllables.

'Did you have friends come to visit you?'

'No.'

'Relatives?'

'Neither of us had relatives in Paris.'

'Where did you meet him?'

'In the shop where I worked.'

She had the pale, dull complexion of someone who lives indoors all the time, and her body had lost all its suppleness.

'That's all.'

'Do you have a photograph of him?'

'No.'

‘I can see one on the mantelpiece.’

A young, good-humoured, almost cheerful Marcel Vivien.

‘I’m not taking that one out of its frame.’

‘You’ll get it back as soon as we’ve had copies made.’

‘And I say no. At least don’t deprive me of what I have left.’

She took a step towards the door.

‘May I have your daughter’s address?’

‘Where did you get mine?’

‘At the local police station.’

She almost told him that he could find her daughter’s address in the same way, then shrugged again.

‘She was barely eight when he left.’

‘She’s married, isn’t she?’

On the mantelpiece, there was also a photograph of two children who looked about six and four.

‘She’s married, yes. Her name’s Odette Delaveau now and she lives at 12, Rue Marcadet. Now I’d like you to leave. I have a customer who’s coming for a fitting this afternoon, and her dress still needs putting together.’

‘I’m very grateful to you,’ Maigret said, not without irony.

‘You’re welcome.’

He still had a lot of questions to ask her but sensed it would be futile. It would take a lot longer to tame her, if he ever could.

He found Torrence on the terrace of Manière’s.

‘How about a beer?’ Torrence said.

Maigret gave in to the temptation. This was the second one.

‘What’s she like?’

‘Tough.’

He somewhat resented the fact that she was making things harder for him with her reticence, but deep down he understood her.

Would she demand her husband’s body so that she could give him a proper funeral? Had she been thinking about that before Maigret tracked her down in Rue Caulaincourt?

It was as if Torrence had read his thoughts:

‘He’s going to need a funeral all the same.’

‘Yes.’

‘And there’ll be reporters and photographers there.’

‘Take me to Rue Marcadet. Number 12.’

‘It’s just round the corner.’

‘I know. In Montmartre, everything’s just round the corner.’

It was also one of the parts of Paris where people lived the longest in the same place. Some of them almost never went down into town.

'Are we going to the daughter's place?'

'Yes.'

The building was identical to the one in Rue Caulaincourt, except that it was a little more recent, and the lift was bigger.

'Shall I let you go up?'

'Yes. I don't think I'll be there long. Judging by how her mother received me.'

He inquired of the concierge. This one was quite old.

'Second floor on the right. She got back with the children just a quarter of an hour ago.'

'Does her husband come back for lunch?'

'No. He wouldn't have time. He has an important position. He's head of a department at the Bon Marché store.'

Maigret went up to the second floor and rang at the door on the right, behind which he could hear children's voices. The apartment was bright and, at this hour, flooded with sunlight.

The young woman who had opened the door looked at him suspiciously.

'You're Inspector Maigret, aren't you?'

'Yes, I am.'

'Who gave you my address?'

'Your mother. I just left her.'

'She agreed to see you?'

'Yes. She has nothing to feel ashamed of, or has she?'

'No, she has nothing to feel ashamed of, but she hates anyone to talk to her about the past.'

'And yet she keeps a photograph of your father on the mantelpiece.'

The two children were on their knees, playing with a little electric train.

'What I don't understand is why you hung up when I still had questions to ask you.'

'I didn't want anyone in the neighbourhood pointing their finger at me.'

'What do people think?'

'That my father died twenty years ago and my mother's a widow.'

'I assume she'll go and identify the body and ask if she can give him a decent funeral.'

'I hadn't thought about it.'

‘Would you both have let him be put in a mass grave?’

‘Like I said, I hadn’t thought about it.’

‘Do you remember your father?’

‘Yes, I remember him very well. Don’t forget I was eight when he left.’

‘What kind of man was he?’

‘A handsome man, very strong, almost always cheerful. He’d often take me out for a walk, just the two of us. He’d buy me ice cream and let me do whatever I wanted.’

‘Not your mother?’

‘Mother was stricter. She was always afraid I’d get dirty.’

‘How did you find out that your father wouldn’t be coming back? Did he send you a letter?’

‘If he did, Mother never told me. I don’t think he wrote to me. We didn’t know a thing. My mother spent her time watching out for him. She’d go every day to his workshop in Rue Lepic to see if he was there.’

‘Had you noticed anything unusual in the days before he left?’

‘No. Did Mother tell you anything?’

‘All I got from her were one-word answers. Do you think she has something to say?’

‘I don’t know. I never asked her, but I have the impression she’s always hidden something from me.’

‘Now that you’re not a little girl any more, I can ask you if you ever heard about your father having another woman.’

She blushed.

‘It’s funny. I thought about that, too. But, given the life he led, it’s not very likely. He wouldn’t have left us for a woman, or else he would have done it openly.’

‘Did he have any friends?’

‘I never knew of any. Nobody ever came to the house. He wasn’t the kind of man who’d spend the evening playing cards in a café.’

‘Did he and your mother ever argue?’

‘I never saw them argue.’

‘Do you have any idea why he might have become a tramp?’

‘None at all. And before yesterday, I would never have believed it.’

‘Was he a Catholic?’

‘No. He didn’t have any religion and never taught me about it. Not that he was against religion. He was indifferent to it, that’s all.’

‘What about you?’

‘I’m the same.’

‘And your mother?’

‘In her youth, she was quite mystical, but she’d dropped all that by the time she got married. All the same, they had a church wedding, I suppose to follow tradition.’

‘Do you often go to see your mother?’

‘No. But she comes here almost every Sunday, to see the children.’

‘Does she bring them sweets?’

‘That’s not her style.’

‘Does she try to entertain them?’

‘No. She just sits stiffly on her chair – she refuses to sit in an armchair – and watches them play. My husband and I sometimes take advantage of her being there to go to the cinema.’

‘Thank you for your help. Do you have anything else to tell me?’

‘No. I’d like to avoid the reporters and photographers.’

‘I’ll do my best, but when your mother goes to identify the body it’ll be hard to stop the papers from mentioning it.’

‘But you will try, won’t you?’

Just as he was reaching out for the door handle, she said:

‘Is it possible to see him?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’d like to.’

Unlike her mother, she had lost her stiffness. She had very likely been the kind of daughter who worshipped her father.

3.

At 2.30, Maigret knocked at the door of the examining magistrate's office. In the long corridor, people were waiting on all the benches, some between two gendarmes, a few handcuffed. A monastic silence prevailed.

'Come in.'

Examining Magistrate Cassure's office was located in the part of the building that had not yet been modernized. It was like being in a novel by Balzac. The black-painted desk had gashes on it, just like in an old school, and files were piled up on the floor in a corner of the room. The clerk may not have been wearing black oversleeves, but he still appeared to have been there since the previous century.

'Take a seat, Maigret.'

Cassure was no more than thirty. In the old days, it would have been unthinkable for someone his age to already have a position in Paris.

Usually, Maigret was suspicious of young magistrates full of theories they had only just assimilated and were determined to put into practice immediately. On the outside, Cassure was just like them. He was a tall, thin, supple young man, perfectly dressed, who still had the air of a schoolboy.

'I assume you've asked to see me because you have something new to tell me.'

'I'd like to bring you up to date on the progress of the investigation, yes.'

'Usually, the police wait until the last moment to get in touch with us, unless they need a detention order.'

He smiled, with a hint of nostalgia.

'You have the reputation, Maigret, of going everywhere yourself, questioning concierges in their lodges, artisans in their workshops, housewives in their kitchens or dining rooms.'

‘It’s true.’

‘We’re not allowed to do that. By tradition we’re confined to our offices, except when the prosecutor’s office is called to the scene of a crime, and even then we’re lost among all the technicians, so it’s really just a formality … I read in the papers that our tramp is a man named Vivien who used to be a cabinetmaker.’

‘That’s correct.’

‘Do you have any idea why he left his family and his workshop to become a tramp?’

‘I’ve talked to his wife and daughter. Neither of them had an answer to that question. I came across a similar case once. And I also remember a very well-known English banker in London who did exactly the same thing.’

‘When did our man disappear?’

‘In 1945.’

‘Did he have another woman, a second family?’

‘So far, it’s impossible to know. My men are combing the neighbourhood. What complicates things is that the only people we can turn to are of a certain age. This morning, I questioned a number of local artisans, shopkeepers and pensioners, but in vain. That was in the bistro where Vivien used to go every morning to have his coffee. They all knew him but knew almost nothing about him, because he didn’t make friends with anyone.’

‘Odd that twenty years later someone should suddenly have decided to kill him.’

‘That’s why I’m desperate to find out about his past. Unless we assume that a maniac suddenly attacked a random tramp, which doesn’t seem very likely.’

‘What’s his wife like?’

‘Not very pleasant. Admittedly, she hasn’t had an easy time of it. Overnight, she was left with nothing, and with a little girl of eight to bring up. Fortunately she could sew a little. She started by working for her neighbours, then gradually built up her clientele.’

‘She never moved?’

‘No. She’s still living in the same building in Rue Caulaincourt that she was living in when her husband was around. She only changed floors to move into a smaller, less expensive apartment. You’d find it hard to put an age to her, she seems to have lost any reason for living. She has the fixed stare and faded eyes of a woman who’s suffered a lot.’

‘And she doesn’t know why her husband left?’

‘I couldn’t get much out of her. If she does know something, she’s keeping it to herself, and nothing will make her change her attitude.’

‘What about her daughter?’

‘She’s twenty-eight now. She’s married to the head of a department at Bon Marché, whom I haven’t seen. She’s a little more forthcoming than her mother but also quite defensive. She has two children, six and four, a girl and a boy.’

‘Is she on good terms with her mother?’

‘More or less. They see each other almost every Sunday, because of the children, but I don’t think there’s much warmth between them. Odette – that’s the daughter’s name – worshipped her father and still does. I think this afternoon or tomorrow they’ll be going to the Forensic Institute to identify the body.’

‘Together?’

‘I’d be surprised. No, they’ll go separately. I told both of them they could see about the funeral as soon as they like. They’re very afraid of reporters and photographers. If you agree with me, I’ll make sure that side of the case doesn’t get made public.’

‘Of course. I understand these two women. And you still have no idea who might have committed the murder?’

‘So far there are no leads. I don’t think I’ve come across such a solitary man in my entire career. Not only was he living alone in a disused building without any water or electricity, but it’s almost impossible to find out how he spent his days.’

‘What does the pathologist say? Was he in good health?’

‘Excellent health. On the outside, he looked sixty-five but apparently he was only fifty-five, and all his organs were in perfect condition.’

‘Thank you for bringing me up to date. If I understand correctly, this could be a long investigation.’

‘Unless we get a lucky break. If Madame Vivien decided to be a bit more talkative, I think she could tell us a lot of things.’

Maigret went back to his office and asked to be put through to the Forensic Institute.

‘Hello? Could you tell me if a Madame Vivien has been to identify her husband’s body?’

‘She left half an hour ago.’

‘Is there any doubt it’s him?’

‘She identified him immediately.’

‘Did she cry?’

‘No. She stood there for a while, not moving, quite stiff, looking at

him. She asked me how soon she could arrange the funeral, and I advised her to speak to you. Dr Lagodinec doesn't need the body any more. He got what he could from it.'

'Thanks. You'll probably also receive a visit from a young woman today. She's the daughter.'

'I'll be ready for her.'

Maigret went and opened the door to the inspectors' room and called Torrence.

'Anything new?'

'As you asked, six men are covering the neighbourhood of Rue Lepic and Rue Caulaincourt, questioning the shopkeepers, the customers in bars and cafés, even people in the street who are old enough to have known Vivien before he disappeared.'

There was nothing to indicate that, having left his family and his workshop without a trace, he had become a tramp overnight. He might have moved to a different neighbourhood, or perhaps lived for a number of years in the provinces.

Since he couldn't cover the whole of France, Maigret was keeping to Montmartre, he couldn't have said exactly why.

A little later, he telephoned Madame Vivien, whose number he found in the directory. She was back home by now. She responded to his call like someone who always expects bad news and is constantly suspicious.

'Hello? Who is this?'

'Maigret. I just heard that you've identified the body. Is it definitely your husband?'

She replied with a curt 'yes'.

'Had he changed much in twenty years?'

'The same as anybody else.'

'I've just been to see the examining magistrate. I mentioned the funeral to him. He's happy for the body to be returned to you so that you can make the arrangements. He's also happy for the press to be kept out of it as much as possible.'

'Thank you.'

'I assume you aren't planning to transfer the body to Rue Caulaincourt?'

'Of course not.'

'When do you think the funeral can take place?'

'The day after tomorrow. I was waiting to hear from you before I called an undertaker.'

'Do you have a plot in one of the Paris cemeteries?'

‘No. My parents weren’t rich people.’

‘In that case, he’ll probably be buried in the cemetery in Ivry.’

‘My mother’s already there.’

‘Have you been in touch with your daughter?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Could you please keep me informed of the time of the funeral?’

‘Are you planning to be there?’

There was no friendliness in the question.

‘Don’t worry. You won’t even notice I’m there.’

‘Unless some reporters latch on to you and follow you.’

‘I’ll make sure that doesn’t happen.’

‘I can’t prevent it, can I?’

She was bitter. She had been bitter for twenty years. Was it in her character? Had she already been like that when she was living with her husband?

Maigret was asking himself every possible and imaginable question, including those that might seem ridiculous. He was trying in vain to reconstruct in his mind the personality of Marcel Vivien, the most solitary of men.

Most people, however strong they are, need human contacts. He hadn’t. He had moved into a large, empty building that might be knocked down at any moment and collected the most useless, most unlikely objects in his room.

The other tramps had only known him by sight. Some had tried to talk to him, but he had gone on his way without replying. At Monsieur Joseph’s hairdressing school, where he went two or three times a week to earn a five-franc coin, he didn’t talk either, just looked straight in the mirror in front of him.

‘The funeral will take place the day after tomorrow,’ Maigret told Torrence. ‘I promised we’d do our utmost to make sure the press doesn’t mention it.’

‘There are reporters phoning two or three times a day.’

‘Just tell them there’s no news.’

‘That’s what I’ve been doing, and so have the other inspectors when I’m not in the office. They aren’t pleased. They’re convinced we’re hiding something from them.’

And it was true, of course. Wouldn’t an enterprising reporter manage to discover what Maigret had discovered?

The next day, the men of the Police Judiciaire continued showing the photographs of Marcel Vivien and asking questions, but to no avail.

Maigret had telephoned Odette Delaveau. She, too, had identified her father.

'Do you know when the funeral is taking place?'

'Hasn't my mother told you?'

'The last time I was in touch with her, by phone, she hadn't yet seen the undertaker.'

'The funeral will be held at nine o'clock tomorrow morning.'

'Will there be a service?'

'No. We won't be bothering with the church. There'll only be my mother, my husband and I following the hearse to Ivry.'

It was a pity that Maigret had had to promise that the newspapers would not be kept informed. The murderer might have loitered around the Forensic Institute or in the cemetery, as often happens.

Had he really known Vivien twenty years earlier? There was nothing to indicate that. The tramp could just as easily have aroused someone's hatred more recently.

Or might another tramp have thought that he was hiding savings in his room?

It was unlikely. A tramp rarely if ever owns a firearm, let alone a .32 calibre pistol.

But how many things could have happened in twenty years? And yet, Maigret kept coming back to Vivien's disappearance, to the day he had left home as he did every morning and had never shown up in his workshop in Rue Lepic.

Was it because of a woman? Why, in that case, would he have subsequently left her and become a tramp? Among the letters received at the Police Judiciaire after the publication of the photographs and the articles, not one mentioned an unknown woman in Vivien's life.

That evening, to avoid constantly mulling over the same problem, which was starting to sicken him, Maigret watched a western on television. After washing the dishes, Madame Maigret came and sat down next to him, taking care not to bother him with questions.

'Tomorrow morning, wake me up half an hour earlier than usual.'

She didn't ask why. It was he who went on:

'I'm going to a funeral.'

She knew at once whose funeral it was, and she brought him his first cup of coffee at seven in the morning.

He had asked Torrence to pick him up at 8.30 in one of the little cars of the Police Judiciaire. Torrence was punctual.

'I assume we're going to the Forensic Institute first?'

‘Yes.’

The hearse was already parked at the kerb, along with another car provided by the undertaker. The two women and Odette’s husband were in this car, and Torrence stopped far enough away not to be noticed. There were no reporters or photographers. Four men brought out the coffin, which looked very heavy, and a few minutes later the cortège set off for Ivry.

Since the day before, the sky had grown overcast, and it wasn’t as hot as before. The weather reports forecast rain in the west and in Paris by the end of the day.

Torrence kept his distance from the car occupied by the family. Maigret smoked his pipe without saying a word, looking straight ahead of him, his thoughts unreadable.

Torrence respected his silence, which wasn’t easy for him, being the most talkative inspector in the Police Judiciaire.

The hearse drove through half the cemetery and stopped at last in front of an open grave in a new area where there were still many gaps. Maigret and Torrence remained more than a hundred metres away. Madame Vivien, her daughter and Delaveau stood motionless by the grave as the coffin was lowered into it. The two women were holding bouquets of flowers.

The shovel was offered to Madame Vivien so that she could be the first to throw earth into the grave, but, to Maigret’s surprise, she shook her head and simply threw in the flowers she was holding. Odette did the same, and in the end it was only Delaveau who threw in the first earth.

He had never met Marcel Vivien. He was too young. Maigret put him at no more than thirty or so. He was dressed in black, which was probably what he wore at the Bon Marché store. He was quite a handsome man, and his moustache was almost black, like his hair.

It was over. The ceremony, if it could be called a ceremony, had lasted only a few minutes. The car reserved for the family set off again. Maigret had scanned the surrounding area and seen no suspicious figures lurking. It seemed to him that, now that his tramp was buried, the truth had receded even further.

He was in quite a bad mood. He remained silent, as if constantly going over the problem with which he had been presented.

Why kill Marcel Vivien without even gutting his straw mattress, which is where poor people usually hide their money?

Despite himself, Maigret kept going back twenty years, and that was

why he had sent six inspectors to Montmartre.

He had a pleasant surprise when he got back to headquarters. One of his six inspectors was waiting for him in a state of some excitement.

'What have you found out?'

'What was the date Vivien went missing?'

'The 23rd of December.'

'And nobody's seen him since?'

'That's right.'

'Did he buy his daughter a Christmas present?'

'I didn't think of asking his wife.'

'Do you know Cyrano's, the brasserie on Place Blanche?'

'Yes.'

'I showed the photographs to one of the waiters, who's in his sixties, and he recognized Vivien.'

'When did he meet him?'

'After the 23rd of December. It was the end of January the following year.'

'How can he be sure after so long?'

'Because he didn't start at Cyrano's until January.'

'Did he see Vivien more than once?'

'At least ten times, in January and February 1946. He wasn't alone. He was with a very young woman, a little brunette who kept putting her hand in his.'

'What time did the two of them come to Cyrano's?'

'About eleven or eleven thirty, when the cinemas closed.'

'Is the waiter sure he recognizes Vivien?'

'He says he does, because he only drank mineral water, whereas the girl with him would order a Cointreau. It was his first job as a café waiter. Before that, he was a room-service waiter in a big hotel on the Boulevards.'

'Did he ever see them anywhere else?'

'No. Julien – that's the waiter's name – lived quite far away, on Boulevard de la Chapelle.'

'When was the last time he saw them?'

'About two months later.'

'And he's never seen Vivien since?'

'No.'

'Or the young woman?'

'No.'

'Did he ever hear the man call her by her first name?'

‘No. Apparently that’s all he knows.’

What emerged from this story, if Julien wasn’t mistaken about the dates, was that Vivien hadn’t left his family and his workshop to become a tramp.

He had left because of a woman. He had presumably planned to start a new life.

How come he hadn’t avoided the neighbourhood? Cyrano’s was a few hundred metres from his workshop, and less than a kilometre from the apartment where his wife and daughter were still living.

Wasn’t he afraid of being recognized? Didn’t he care? Had he told his wife that he was going to live with another woman? Was that the reason for Madame Vivien’s mistrustful attitude?

‘Go back to the neighbourhood this afternoon and keep questioning people. It’s possible there are other waiters of a certain age at Cyrano’s. Even the owner.’

‘The owner’s still in his twenties. He’s the son of the former owner, who’s moved to the country.’

‘Find out where.’

‘All right, chief.’

‘There are lots of little hotels in the neighbourhood. They’ll have to be checked too. In those days it was almost impossible to find an apartment.’

Maigret knew that in the end he would go to Cyrano’s himself and roam about the Rochechouart neighbourhood.

He went home for lunch but first had an aperitif at the Brasserie Dauphine and then took a taxi.

As he had foreseen, Maigret found himself, at about 2.30, in front of the terrace of Cyrano’s. Place Blanche was bustling, thanks to the coaches and the tourists moving about in groups, as if in clusters, cameras around their necks. All of them, or almost all of them, were photographing the Moulin Rouge, which was right next door to the brasserie.

The terrace was full, and there wasn’t a single chair free. The waiters insinuating themselves between the tables – there were three of them – were quite young, but, in the gloom of the interior, Maigret saw one who couldn’t have been far off sixty.

He went in and sat down on a banquette.

‘A draught beer.’

He hadn’t brought Torrence with him because he was slightly

embarrassed by his growing interest in Marcel Vivien.

'Is your name Julien?' he asked when he was served. 'Did one of my men talk to you this morning?'

'Are you Inspector Maigret?'

'Yes.'

'It's an honour to meet you. I think I told your inspector all I know.'

'These memories of yours definitely go back to 1945?'

'Yes. The reason I'm so sure, like I said this morning, is because it was my first job working in a place like this.'

'End of December, beginning of January?'

'There I'm less sure. At the end of December, because of the holidays, it's a madhouse here, and we don't really have time to look at the customers closely.'

Someone called him from a table in the second row, and he went and took the order and returned with two glasses of beer.

'I'm sorry, but I'm alone inside. The others are dealing with the terrace. What was I saying? January, yes … Probably February, too, because I got used to them, and that must have taken a while.'

'You have no doubt about identifying Vivien?'

'I didn't know his name, but he was definitely the man who came almost every evening in the company of a pretty girl.'

'Almost always at the time when the cinemas close?'

'Yes. That struck me, I don't know why.'

'Would you recognize the young woman?'

'You know, with women, it's harder to recognize them after twenty years.'

An idea occurred to him.

'But I'd recognize that one.'

'Why?'

'She had a little birthmark on her cheek.'

'Left or right?'

'Let me think. They almost always sat at that table. So it would have been the left cheek I saw when I served them.'

He had to move away again to attend to another customer, who ordered a brandy with water.

'Did you ever see this young woman with anyone else?'

'No. I don't remember. I think it would have struck me because I'd got used to her face and the way she dressed.'

'How did she dress?'

'Always in black. A little black evening dress and a black coat with a

fur collar.'

'Did the couple have a car?'

'No. They came on foot, as if they lived nearby.'

'Did they ever take a taxi?'

There was a taxi rank just opposite the brasserie.

'Not as far as I know.'

'And when they left, did they ever head for the Métro station?'

'No. I assumed they were local. After midnight, it's another matter, because the nightclubs fill up with customers from all over the world. But here, it's like being on the other bank of the river. There's a big difference between the two sides of the boulevard.'

He struck his forehead.

'What did I tell you before? Did I say 1945? But now, after answering all these questions … It was 1946, of course. In 1945, I was still working as a room-service waiter at the Grand Hôtel.'

This time, he had to go to yet another table to take a payment.

When he came back, he said:

'I love this neighbourhood. It's different from the rest of Paris. There are still lots of artisans who have their workshops in the courtyards of buildings. A lot of office workers, too, civil servants, shop assistants. Plus pensioners who are too fond of Montmartre to retire to the country … Is there anything else I can do to help?'

'I don't think so. If you should happen to remember anything interesting, don't hesitate to phone Quai des Orfèvres.'

'I'm coming, I'm coming!' he called out to four new customers who were getting impatient.

Clouds were starting to gather in the west even though half the sky was still more or less clear. Every now and again, there was a slight gust of cold air.

Maigret drank his beer slowly, vowing that there wouldn't be any more today. He was getting ready to pay for his drink when his neighbour leaned over in his direction.

'Did I hear correctly? Are you Inspector Maigret? I hope you don't mind me speaking to you like this.'

He was very fat and very red, with three chins and a huge belly.

'I was born in Montmartre and I've lived here all my life. I used to have a picture framer's shop on Boulevard Rochechouart. I sold the business three years ago, but I've kept my old habits.'

Maigret looked at him curiously, not sure where he was going with this.

‘I didn’t intend to, but I overheard part of your conversation with the waiter. You were talking about the tramp who was murdered in a run-down building in Les Halles, weren’t you? I had a good look at his photographs in the newspapers and I’m sure I’m not wrong.’

‘So you know him?’

‘Yes.’

‘Have you seen him recently?’

‘No. This goes back nearly twenty years. I recognized him best in the photographs where he didn’t have a moustache.’

‘Did you ever go to his workshop in Rue Lepic?’

‘No. If I’m to believe what the papers say, he wasn’t there any more. Like Julien, I met him in 1946.’

‘At what time of year?’

‘Starting in February, unless I’m mistaken. I saw him regularly for about six months.’

‘Did he live near you?’

‘I don’t know where he and his girlfriend lived but they always had lunch in the same restaurant as me, La Bonne Fourchette in Rue Dancourt. It’s a little restaurant where everyone’s a regular and there are only half a dozen tables, so you all end up knowing each other.’

‘Are you sure this went on for six months?’

‘I saw them in August, just before I went off to spend three weeks on the Riviera.’

‘And when you got back?’

‘I assumed I’d see them, but they weren’t there any more. I asked Boutant, the owner, about them, and he told me that one day they’d suddenly stopped coming.’

‘Maybe they were also on holiday.’

‘No. They would have come back in the autumn. I never saw them on the boulevard or in any of the streets either.’

Maigret was quite troubled by what he was hearing. The man was clearly genuine and seemed to have an excellent memory. Adding his memories to those of the waiter, the only conclusion was that as soon as Marcel Vivien had left the family home in Rue Caulaincourt and abandoned his workshop in Rue Lepic, he had more or less lived with a very young woman, not much more than a girl, without taking the trouble to change neighbourhoods.

For two months, they had gone to Cyrano’s quite regularly, after leaving the cinema. Subsequently, up until mid-August, they had frequented a little restaurant in Rue Dancourt, a few blocks away.

What did they live on? Did Vivien have savings? Could he really have taken them without leaving anything for his wife and daughter?

That was another question he would have to ask Madame Vivien, because her daughter wouldn't necessarily know. But would she answer him?

He sighed, paid for his beer, thanked Julien, then his neighbour the picture framer.

'Could what I've told you be useful?'

'Definitely.'

As he walked along the boulevard, he filled a pipe. In Rue Dancourt, he immediately found the restaurant called La Bonne Fourchette. The main room was small and the door had been left open to let in a little air. A middle-aged man in a chef's uniform was leaning on the counter, reading a newspaper.

It was an old-style restaurant that still had pigeon-holes in the wall for the regulars' napkins. You just had to walk through a glazed door and you would find yourself in the kitchen.

At this hour, of course, there were no customers.

'Can I get you a drink?'

Maigret walked over to the tin counter.

'I'm not thirsty but I'd like to ask you a few questions.'

'What are you?'

'I'm a detective chief inspector from the Police Judiciaire.'

'I thought the police would show up sooner or later.'

'Why?'

'Because Vivien, that weird tramp, came here over several months.'

'What year was that?'

'1946.'

'Was he alone?'

'No. He was always with a pretty girl who never missed the opportunity to cuddle up to him.'

'How come you remember them?'

'Because the waiter and the customers automatically smiled when they saw them come in. They looked so much in love. They'd even stop eating to kiss on the lips, in front of everyone.'

'Didn't that surprise you?'

'You know, in this business, we see all sorts, it takes a lot to surprise us. True, he looked about fifteen years older than her, but there are lots of couples like that.'

'Do you know where they lived?'

‘No. In the neighbourhood, probably, because they came on foot, arm in arm, like people who have all the time in the world.’

‘Did they ever leave in a taxi?’

‘Not as far as I know.’

‘Did they sometimes come for dinner?’

‘No. But I didn’t think anything of that. At lunchtime we get people who work locally, and they go home at the end of the day, so in the evening we have a different set of customers.’

‘When did they stop coming?’

‘Around the 15th of August. I closed for two weeks to take my wife to the country and go fishing. When I got back, I didn’t see them again. I guess they found another restaurant.’

Maigret thanked him and found himself back on Boulevard Rochechouart, where he walked idly, just like the locals. He didn’t understand. There was something grating about this story.

Marcel Vivien had left home two days before Christmas. Even though he seemed to have loved his eight-year-old daughter, he hadn’t waited another three days before vanishing.

Had he only just met the young woman – the girl – he was going to join?

There was a phone booth nearby, and he shut himself up in it. He found Madame Vivien’s number and heard her curt voice.

‘What is it?’

‘It’s me again. Detective Chief Inspector Maigret. This time, I have just one question to ask you, but it’s extremely important for how the investigation continues. When your husband disappeared, did he leave you any money?’

‘No!’

‘Did he have a bank account, a savings book?’

‘He had a bank account, because customers paid by cheque.’

‘So he took everything he had in credit?’

‘Yes.’

‘Were you expecting him to leave?’

‘How could I have expected it?’

‘Did you know he was having an affair?’

‘No. And I have no desire to hear about it.’

And with that she hung up.

In August 1946, Marcel Vivien was still living in Montmartre with his girlfriend. But then all trace of him had been lost. Had he moved to the provinces, or gone abroad, or was it then that he had opted for the life

of a tramp?

What had become of his girlfriend, who made the regulars at La Bonne Fourchette smile tenderly with her displays of affection?

Maigret was lucky to catch a bus with an open platform. It was one of the last, and soon there wouldn't be any more of them at all.

He calmly smoked his pipe and gazed out at the ever-changing spectacle of Paris.

What conclusion could be drawn from the little he knew? Basically, he knew how it had started, when Marcel Vivien, a man with a good trade, a wife and a daughter, had overnight decided to abandon them all and go off with a young woman.

How long would his savings have lasted? And what would he have done when they were exhausted?

It was like an abrupt break in his life. There he was in August 1946, in Montmartre, a regular of Cyrano's and La Bonne Fourchette.

After that, a huge gap, another disappearance. Had he tired of his girlfriend or had she tired of him?

He was nowhere to be found until, nineteen years later, he was discovered dead in a dilapidated building. He had been living alone. He didn't spend time with anyone. Two or three times a week, he went to the hairdressing school and put himself in the hands of a pupil.

Whoever had killed him hadn't done so at random – you don't generally walk around with a .32 calibre pistol in your pocket.

Was the reason for the murder to be found in the past, in those last months in Montmartre, or else in whatever Vivien had done in the subsequent years?

They didn't even know how long he had been living in the neighbourhood of Les Halles.

What had become of his girlfriend? What was her name? Without thinking, he walked to Impasse du Vieux-Four. There was an officer at the door of the house where Vivien had lived.

He must have lived there quite a long time to have accumulated the bric-à-brac cluttering the room. Had he become a fanatic? Was he still in his right mind? Monsieur Joseph, the owner of the hairdressing school, didn't seem to have noticed anything abnormal. Admittedly, he was more used to seeing alcoholics and eccentrics than normal people.

Maigret went upstairs. It was the first time he had come alone to this dark, damp building with its unexpected creaks and squeaks. He wasn't searching for anything in particular. He just wanted another look at the setting in which Vivien had lived.

In the room, no prints had been found apart from his, which suggested that his killer had been wearing gloves.

There was even a dismantled oil ceiling light on the floor. What had he been planning to do with it? Unmatched shoes of different sizes. A ripped suitcase that had once been elegant.

Had he by any chance occupied other rooms in the building, only abandoning them when they were full? Maigret climbed the stairs, which weren't very solid and had several steps missing. On the fourth floor, there were no more windows, no more doors, and the only things on the floor were old crates and old cardboard boxes.

He walked back down, still rummaging, trying not to get covered in dust. He imagined Vivien coming back alone in the evening, striking a match and setting off up the dark staircase. The question now was no longer who he was, or what he had done in the distant past. Now it was: how long had he been leading this life?

He nodded to the officer on duty, walked to Rue des Prouvaires and entered the police station. Ascan didn't make him wait for long. Maigret sat down in his office.

'I think I'm going to need you.'

'Do you know anything more apart from what the papers have said?'

'Yes. But I don't want it to be talked about just yet. When he left his home on the 23rd of December, Vivien didn't move out of the neighbourhood. I don't know where he went, but in January he was seen in the company of a pretty girl in a brasserie in Place Blanche, Cyrano's.'

'Not far from his workshop.'

'Yes. He didn't seem to be hiding. I don't know if it was thoughtlessness. One month later, still with the same girl, he starts to have lunch in a little local restaurant in Rue Dancourt. He doesn't leave the neighbourhood. He's taken out everything he had in the bank. I may be able to find out how much. He left his wife and daughter with nothing. He frequented the same restaurant until mid-August. After that we lose track of him until we find him living alone as a tramp in Les Halles. This is where you come in. Les Halles is within your jurisdiction. There are lots of tramps there, just as there are lots of ex-convicts and former prostitutes. Among your officers, there must be some who are very familiar with such people.'

'There are four of them, no more than that.'

'Can you get them to ask questions for me? My men wouldn't know who to talk to, or how to go about it.'

‘That’s easy. Do you have photographs? Especially the ones with the moustache and beard.’

‘I have a set here, but I’ll call my office to have more sent to you.’

‘I’m not sure my men will get anywhere, but they’ll do their best. What exactly do you want to know?’

‘How long Vivien has been living as a tramp. It might have been a few months, it might have been nearly twenty years. Tramps know each other, at least by sight, and take an interest in any newcomers, even if they avoid asking questions.’

‘Yes. The ones from Les Halles aren’t the only ones who need questioning, though, there are also those who live by the river.’

‘That’s what I’m planning to do. Do you mind if I use your phone?’

Once he had got through to the Police Judiciaire, he asked to speak to Moers.

‘Maigret here. Is Mestral there? … Yes? I’d like him to print four or five sets of photographs for me urgently, especially the ones with the goatee and the moustache. They need to be taken to the police station in Rue des Prouvaires before the day is out and handed over to Chief Inspector Ascan … Thanks, Moers. Goodbye.’

And to Ascan:

‘You’ll have them in an hour.’

‘I’ll put my men on the job tonight.’

By the time Maigret left, the rain was pouring down, and a few hailstones were bouncing off the cobbles. The sky had darkened completely, and Maigret was lucky to hail a free taxi.

‘Police Judiciaire,’ he said.

He was tired of constantly asking himself the same questions and not knowing the answers.

In the inspectors’ room, he asked:

‘Who’s free tomorrow morning?’

They looked at each other and three of them raised their hands.

‘You’ll need to get photographs from Criminal Records. Go to Montmartre, especially around Boulevard Rochechouart, and do the rounds of all the little hotels and rooming houses. There’s a good chance Marcel Vivien and his girlfriend lived in one of those places for about six months. I’m particularly interested in the girl. You can talk to the local shopkeepers, too, especially those selling food. Good luck, boys.’

He went back into his office, where Torrence came and joined him.

‘Anything new, chief?’

He didn’t feel up to telling his story again.

‘Tomorrow,’ he said. ‘Janvier can call back his six men.’

He dozed for a good half-hour in his armchair while the rain came in through the open window, soaking the wooden floor.

4.

The next morning, he was in the office bright and early, and by the time the inspectors arrived, he had already gone through his mail. He always said that the more quickly a case is dealt with, the greater the chance of solving it.

The men of the first arrondissement must have been working for him during the night, but he avoided calling Chief Inspector Ascan: he didn't want him to feel he was being put under pressure. Janvier was handling the day-to-day cases with the few inspectors available. The offices were almost empty.

It had stopped raining. The sky was blue, with just a few small white clouds edged in pink by the sun.

'Let's go, Torrence.'

He wasn't following a well-defined plan, but trusting rather to his instinct. What plan could he have come up with in a case like this anyway, where there was nothing solid to hold on to, no material clues?

'Let's go to Rue Lepic. I think I saw a branch of Crédit Lyonnais just across the street from Vivien's workshop.'

They got there quickly, there being little traffic, especially at this hour.

'Try to park somewhere and wait for me.'

He went to one of the counters.

'I'd like to speak to the manager.'

'Who shall I say?'

'Detective Chief Inspector Maigret.'

'You're in luck. He got back from holiday yesterday.'

He didn't have to wait. He was shown into an office where a man in his forties with an open, sunburned face invited him to sit down.

'What can I do for you, inspector?'

'If you've been reading the newspapers lately, you'll know about the

Vivien case. Marcel Vivien had his workshop just opposite this bank. That was twenty years ago. I'd like to know if you still have his statements.'

'After twenty years, no. When an account is closed, that is, when a customer withdraws the whole of his balance, we keep his file for a few months, then send it to our head office on Boulevard des Italiens.'

'And do they keep these papers for a long time?'

'I don't know exactly how long, but certainly no more than ten years. If that wasn't the case, imagine the premises we'd need to file everything away.'

'I saw an older man behind one of the counters.'

'That's Frochot, our oldest employee. He's been working here for forty years. He's retiring at the end of the month.'

'Could I have a word with him?'

The manager pushed a button. A young man half opened the door.

'Send Monsieur Frochot in here.'

The man had a mischievous face and eyes that sparkled behind his thick glasses.

'Please take a seat, Monsieur Frochot. This is Detective Chief Inspector Maigret. He'd like to ask you a few questions.'

'It's an honour.'

'Do you have a good memory, Monsieur Frochot?'

'That's the reputation I have here.'

'The customer I'm going to talk to you about left the neighbourhood twenty years ago and I have every reason to believe that he closed his account.'

'Marcel Vivien?'

'How did you know?'

'I read the papers, and for you to come all this way …'

'You're right. Do you know approximately how much Vivien had in the bank?'

'His account was fairly small and fluctuated quite a bit depending on his income. Let's say on average he had between ten and fifteen thousand in credit. At the end of every month, he'd withdraw what he needed to live on, about two thousand francs.'

'When did you last see him?'

'One morning, just when I'd opened my counter. He told me he was leaving and wanted to withdraw the balance of his account. I asked him where he was going to live and he told me he was moving to Montparnasse.'

‘How much did you hand over to him?’

‘About twelve thousand five hundred francs.’

‘Did he strike you as nervous?’

‘No. He was a cheerful man, and he was really good at his trade. Even major antique dealers entrusted him with furniture to repair.’

‘How long did he have his workshop in Rue Lepic?’

‘Just under ten years. Eight or nine. He was a quiet man. His home address was in Rue Caulaincourt.’

‘Many thanks, Monsieur Frochot … Wait, just one more question. Did you ever bump into him in the street after he left?’

‘Once he’d gone, I never saw him again. I don’t understand how he could have become a tramp. He always struck me as such a well-balanced man.’

Maigret walked back to the police car, in which Torrence was waiting.

‘Did you find what you were looking for, chief?’

‘Yes and no. The little I found out doesn’t get me very far anyway.’

‘Where shall I drive you?’

The little barrows full of fruit and vegetables were under attack from the local housewives, and their voices formed a continuous rumble.

‘Back to headquarters.’

At that very moment, three inspectors were doing the rounds of the local hotels, looking for traces of Vivien. It might take many days, given how many small hotels there were in the neighbourhood. Or they could just as easily be lucky and knock on the right door immediately.

In part, that was what happened. Maigret had only just sat down at his desk when one of the three men, Inspector Dupeu, was put through to him.

‘Where are you phoning from, Dupeu?’

‘The Hôtel du Morvan in Rue de Clignancourt. Vivien used to live here, and the owner remembers him well. I think you should talk to him.’

‘Let’s go, Torrence.’

Torrence liked nothing better than to be outside, and he enjoyed driving the chief around.

‘Rue de Clignancourt. Hôtel du Morvan.’

They found Dupeu smoking a cigarette in the street. Next to the door of the hotel, a terrazzo plaque announced: ‘Rooms by the month, week and day’.

All three of them went in. The owner was a man with a large belly and flat feet clad in carpet slippers. He was unshaven. He looked as if he

hadn't even washed, and his shirt was open, showing his hairy chest. He seemed perpetually tired, and his eyes were watery.

'So you're Maigret,' he said, holding out a hand of dubious cleanliness.

'I'm told you were here in 1946.'

'I was here well before that.'

'So you found the name Marcel Vivien in your registers?'

'I don't keep registers for twenty years.'

'But you do remember him?'

'I remember him very well. He was a good-looking man, quite friendly.'

'How long did he stay here?'

'From January to June.'

'Are you sure he didn't stay till August?'

'I'm sure of it, because his room was immediately taken over by a bitch who put on airs and who I had to show the door.'

'Vivien wasn't alone. Do you know the name of his girlfriend? I assume you filled out a form for her, too.'

'There was no need for a form because she didn't sleep here.'

'You mean they weren't living together?'

'That's right.'

Maigret was astonished. This was the last thing he would have expected.

'Did she ever come to the hotel?'

'She sometimes came for him when it was nearly midday. He was a late riser, because he didn't usually get in until two or three in the morning.'

'And are you sure he was alone?'

'If he wasn't I'd have been forced to register his girlfriend. The Hotel Agency don't joke about things like that.'

'Did she ever go up to his room?'

'Quite often, but during the day. I can't stop that.'

'And you don't know her name?'

'I heard Vivien call her by her first name: Nina.'

'Did she have any distinguishing marks?'

'She had a birthmark on her cheek.'

'How did she dress?'

'Always in black. Whenever I saw her anyway.'

'Did Vivien have a lot of luggage?'

'Just one suitcase, a new one, quite cheap, which he probably bought

just before he got here.'

The three men looked at each other. They had learned only one thing: that Vivien had left the Hôtel du Morvan in June, which meant that he had spent July and part of August somewhere else.

As for the girl, they still didn't know anything about her, not even her surname. Had she been living in another hotel, or with relatives, or had she rented a little apartment?

It was a morning of comings and goings. The previous day's rain hadn't cooled the air. On the contrary, it was hotter than the previous two days, and a lot of men were carrying their jackets over their arms.

Maigret had only been back at the Police Judiciaire for a quarter of an hour when the telephone rang. This time it was Lourtie, also calling from Montmartre. They had both been dealt a lucky hand.

'I'm on Place des Abbesses, chief. I'm phoning from a bistro opposite the Hôtel Jonard. The owner doesn't seem to know much, but I thought you'd rather question him yourself.'

'Let's go, Torrence.'

'What's the address this time?'

'Hôtel Jonard, Place des Abbesses.'

The façade was covered in white ceramics, and garlicky cooking smells filled the entrance hall.

'I told your inspector all I know.'

The man wasn't talkative. He wasn't cheerful either.

'Do you remember him well?'

'I wouldn't exactly say well. I remember him because he had a cute girlfriend.'

'Was she a guest?'

'No. She never spent the night here. She sometimes went up to his room during the day.'

'When did he move in here?'

'In June, if I remember correctly.'

'And when did he leave?'

'Sometime in August. Closer to the end of the month than the beginning. He was very proper, very polite, which isn't the case with all our guests.'

It was discouraging not to have the slightest information about the girl, apart from the birthmark on her left cheek.

'You can go back to headquarters,' Maigret said to Lourtie.

As for himself, he asked Torrence to drive him to the police station in the first arrondissement. Chief Inspector Ascan, whose door was open,

came out to greet him.

'Did they tell you about my phone call?'

'No. I've just come from Montmartre.'

'I called you to say that we have a few results. Nothing amazing yet, but I think it may help you. Take a seat.'

Maigret slowly filled his pipe and mopped his brow before lighting it.

'My inspectors have laid their hands on the oldest tramp in Les Halles. Everyone calls him Toto. Mind you, he only moved to the area fifteen years ago. I kept him for you just in case, because these people aren't always easy to find.'

An officer went to fetch this Toto. He was a middle-aged man who smelled of wine but wasn't drunk.

'Am I going to be caged up for much longer? I'm a free man, aren't I? Don't even have a police record.'

'Detective Chief Inspector Maigret has a few questions to ask you.'

'Where were you living before you came to Les Halles?'

'Toulouse.'

'What were you doing there?'

'Pretty much the same as here. Except that, in the provinces, you get hassled a lot more.'

'Have you ever had a regular job?'

He seemed to give this a great deal of thought.

'I've always lugged crates and baskets.'

'What about when you were young?'

'I left home when I was fourteen. I was taken back three times and each time I ran away again. They should have tied me up.'

'How long have you been in Paris?'

'Fifteen years. I've known all the tramps. I've seen the old ones die, seen new ones arrive …'

'Did you know Marcel Vivien?'

'I didn't know his name until this gentleman told me it. He was here before me. He wasn't chatty. He was always on his own and whenever you said anything to him he'd give you a one-word answer or sometimes not answer at all.'

'Where did he sleep?'

'At that time, I don't know. I sometimes ran into him at the Salvation Army. Then I heard he'd moved into some dump that was due to be knocked down.'

'Did you ever see him with a woman?'

He started to laugh, as if the question were really funny.

‘No, inspector. You don’t get much of that here. Especially for a man like him who I bet used to be someone respectable. Mind you, we did have an ex-doctor once, but he drank, and he didn’t last long …’

‘Did you ever see Vivien with someone you didn’t know?’

‘No. Not that I had any reason to take any notice of him.’

‘Thank you for your help.’

Toto turned to Ascan.

‘Can I go?’

‘Yes.’

‘Bring the woman in!’ Ascan said to his officer.

‘A woman?’

‘Yes.’

She looked more like a monster. She was so huge, she could barely sit on a chair. Her legs were swollen, and so were her wrists. She was at least half drunk and looked at those around her as if challenging them.

‘What are you going to blame Nana for this time?’

‘Nothing,’ Ascan replied. ‘We just have a few questions to ask you.’

‘Will you give me something to buy a litre with?’

‘All right.’

She stood up and held out her hand. She preferred to be paid in advance, and Ascan put five francs in her filth-encrusted hand.

‘Hurry up, I’m thirsty.’

‘You told the inspector who questioned you last night that you saw someone go into the house in Impasse du Vieux-Four.’

‘That’s the honest truth.’

‘When was this?’

‘Three or four days ago. I never know which day it is. They’re all much of a muchness to me. What I can tell you is, it was the night before they found the body of a tramp there.’

‘What time was it?’

‘About three in the morning.’

‘What kind of man was he?’

‘Middle-aged but not old. He was very upright. You could tell he wasn’t from round here.’

‘How could you tell?’

‘I don’t know. You can feel it right away.’

‘Had you ever seen him before?’

‘Yes.’

‘When?’

‘That same night, about ten. He came out of Pharamond’s, the

restaurant, and stood there watching the fruit, vegetables and fish being unloaded. You could see he wasn't used to it. He looked as if he was interested in everything.'

'Was Marcel Vivien there?'

'The one who had his picture in the papers? I think he was helping with the unloading.'

'And did the man you saw again at three in the morning speak to him?'

'No … Actually I don't know. With all these questions of yours, you're mixing me up, and I'm getting really thirsty.'

Maigret signalled that he had finished with her and she was allowed to go. In an hour, with the litre of cheap red wine she was going to buy, she would be found lying dead drunk on the pavement.

Ascan said:

'My men will keep looking tonight, but I thought those two had interesting things to say.'

'Yes,' Maigret replied, relighting his pipe, which he had allowed to go out. 'First of all, we now know that Vivien had been here for more than fifteen years. Secondly, that a man who didn't seem used to Les Halles was in the area the night Vivien was killed. He must have seen him unloading vegetables. Had he been looking for him? We don't know. But we do know that he showed up in Impasse du Vieux-Four at about three in the morning. If he was the one who shot Vivien, it's likely that in the meantime he went home to fetch his gun, because it's highly unlikely he had dinner at Pharamond's with a weapon of that calibre in his pocket.'

'Only, we don't have any idea who this man is, or where he lives. He could just as easily have come from the provinces.'

'Do you think the woman might have made him up?'

'I'd be surprised if she did. Tramps don't like getting on the wrong side of the police and it can get them into a lot of trouble.'

'There's still a gap of five years to cover, with all the little hotels in Montmartre and Les Halles. It's quite possible Vivien spent them here.'

'We don't have any tramps older than Toto. People like that don't live to a ripe old age. The hairdressing school wasn't around in those days. As for the tradesmen, they do good business and retire back to their villages as soon as they can. It won't be easy finding one who was here in 1946.'

'Thank you,' Maigret said with a sigh, getting to his feet. 'The information you've obtained is very useful. I wish I could say the same about what I've learned in Montmartre.'

‘You haven’t found any trace of him?’

‘Oh, yes. Not only in one hotel, but in two. Only, his girlfriend didn’t stay with him. She never spent the night in either of the two hotels. Either she lived in another hotel or she had a place of her own. If she’d been living with her parents she probably wouldn’t have stayed out until the early hours every night. We don’t have a surname, we don’t have an address. All we have is a birthmark on her left cheek.’

‘You’ll get your hands on her in the end.’

‘That’d be a real stroke of luck. As for the customer from Pharamond’s, it’s highly unlikely he’ll come back to Les Halles. If he did kill Vivien, he won’t want to be seen.’

‘We’ll keep looking anyway.’

‘Thanks, Ascan.’

Maigret walked to the car and had Torrence drive him back to Quai des Orfèvres. The intense heat had returned after all too short an interval. Maigret would have liked to carry his jacket over his arm like everyone else. Once in his office, he took it off.

‘Anything new?’

‘A woman phoned. Madame Delaveau.’

Vivien’s daughter.

‘Did she say what it was about?’

‘No. You can call her back, she won’t be going out any more this morning.’

Maigret asked for her number and heard her voice at the other end of the line, with the cries of children in the background.

‘Hello. Inspector Maigret?’

‘Yes, madame.’

The young woman’s voice had lost the aggressive quality it had had on their first encounter.

‘I don’t know if the little I have to tell you is worthwhile, but if you’d like to drop by early this afternoon, I’ll tell you what I know. Later, I have to take the children for a walk. I think that when I’ve talked to you, I’ll feel more at peace with myself.’

He went home for lunch, and his wife served him coq au vin. It was one of his favourite dishes, but he ate distractedly, without even complimenting her.

‘You’re on edge, aren’t you?’ she ventured to say. ‘Since this case started, you haven’t been yourself. It’s as if something’s getting you down.’

‘You know, in every case there’s always a moment when I lose

confidence in myself. Well, this time those moments just keep coming. I think I've taken a step forwards and I realize that I'm actually still in the same place. Don't forget that I'm mainly trying to establish what happened twenty years ago. On top of that, there are times when Marcel Vivien, the man who was killed in Les Halles, strikes me as a sympathetic character and other times when I hate him.'

'You'll find your way through, you'll see.'

'I'll have to, one way or another. Which reminds me, I should pay the examining magistrate a visit.'

He dropped by Quai des Orfèvres, and Torrence resumed his driver's job.

'Les Halles? Montmartre?'

'Montmartre. Odette Delaveau's apartment in Rue Marcadet.'

She was wearing a brightly coloured floral dress and looked particularly fresh.

'Please sit down.'

The children must have been taking a nap. They weren't in the living room and there wasn't a sound from them. In addition, Odette Delaveau spoke in a low voice.

'Have you found out the girl's address?' she asked.

The newspapers hadn't mentioned her yet. It was an aspect of the case he hadn't wanted disclosed too soon. He asked with feigned innocence:

'What girl?'

She smiled slyly.

'You're afraid of giving too much away, aren't you? You don't entirely trust me.'

'You haven't answered my question.'

'The girl my father left us for. I didn't know it at the time. My mother didn't tell me anything. Contrary to what she says, my mother was very jealous and followed my father several times when he left his workshop. So she knew he was having an affair before he left us. She didn't say anything to him about it, but she'd already started to withdraw into herself. Even later, when I was old enough to understand, it wasn't me she told … It happened several years ago, when I was still living with her. I have an uncle in Meaux, Uncle Charles, who had a big fertilizer business and always dropped by to see my mother whenever he came to Paris. When we didn't have any money or anyone to support us, I'm sure he was the one who helped my mother until she could earn her own living.'

Maigret had automatically filled his pipe but hadn't lit it.

‘It’s all right, you can smoke. My husband smokes all evening when he watches television … Anyway, one day, I was in my room, and the living-room door was ajar. Uncle Charles was there, and I heard what they were saying. I can still hear my mother’s voice: “To be honest, it was good riddance. I couldn’t have stood it much longer, living with a man who’d been with another woman.” “Are you sure of what you’re saying?” “I followed them several times. I’ve started to know their habits and I know where she lives. They didn’t even take the trouble to leave the neighbourhood. Marcel’s besotted with her. I’ve never seen a man in such a state. He’d do anything not to lose her.” You heard what my mother said to Uncle Charles: “*I know where she lives* …” That’s what suddenly came back to me. It’s why I phoned you.’

‘Did she give your uncle the address?’

‘No. They talked business. My uncle asked if there were any bills to pay, if any customers owed us money. I suppose you’re interested in the address?’

‘Very much so. I have several inspectors spending their time looking for it, so far in vain. We don’t even know her name.’

‘I’m sure my mother knows it. Don’t tell her it was me who sent you to see her.’

‘Don’t worry. And I’m very grateful to you. I don’t suppose you remember a very tall, very thin man with a long face and blue eyes?’

‘When would I have seen him?’

‘I don’t know. Perhaps twenty years ago. Perhaps recently.’

‘I can’t think of anyone who answers that description. Is it important to find him?’

‘According to a witness, he may have been your father’s killer.’

Her eyes clouded over slightly.

‘No. I don’t know him.’

She shook his hand when he left.

‘Good luck with Mother.’

He had himself driven to Rue Caulaincourt. It took a while for the door to be opened.

‘It’s you!’ Madame Vivien sighed in an irritable tone. ‘You’ll have to wait in the hall, I’m in the middle of a fitting.’

She motioned him to a chair that wasn’t at all comfortable, and he sat there quietly, his hat in his lap, his still unlit pipe in his right hand. He could hear women’s voices in the next room, but they were muted and he couldn’t make out more than the odd word.

His wait lasted about half an hour. The customer was a blonde with

big breasts and a broad smile, who looked at him curiously as she walked to the door. Once she had gone, Madame Vivien turned to face him.

'Are you ever going to leave me in peace?'

'I assure you I'm bothering you as little as possible.'

'What would it be like if you weren't so thoughtful?'

'I realize you're in mourning.'

To which she retorted in a harsh voice:

'It has nothing to do with being in mourning. I only went to the funeral at your insistence. Now that he's finally buried and I was there to see it, you must be happy.'

'You seem to hate him.'

'I do.'

They had moved into the next room, where a dress bristling with pins lay on the table.

'Because of his girlfriend?'

She shrugged, as if the question were ridiculous.

'Listen, inspector. It may be best if I speak frankly. For years, Marcel was an extraordinary man, a very hard worker as well as a devoted husband. He almost never went out without either his daughter or me. Then, one fine day, everything changed. He was out almost every evening and he didn't even bother to make up an excuse. He went out, and that was it. And he'd get back well after midnight.'

'So you followed him?'

'Isn't that what any woman would have done?'

Had she ever loved him? That was far from certain. He was her companion, and the family's breadwinner. But had she ever felt real love?

'I followed them, yes. Because, of course, he wasn't going out alone. They were like young lovers who constantly have to shake themselves because they can't believe they're together. She was barely twenty, and he was thirty-five. I guess he didn't realize how ridiculous he was. He'd hold her round the waist. They'd sometimes do a little dance on the pavement, then they'd kiss and burst out laughing. You know why? Because once again they'd kissed under a streetlamp. I followed them into a cinema. You should have seen how they behaved themselves in there. Then they went for a drink in a nearby brasserie.'

'Cyrano's.'

'So you know about that?'

'It must have been in January or February 1946.'

‘January, yes. He’d just left me. But I’d already followed them when he was still living here.’

‘Did you ever speak to him?’

‘No. I had nothing to say to him. I couldn’t force him to come back, could I? He’d become a different man anyway, someone I’d never have suspected.’

‘Was he staying at the Hôtel du Morvan?’

‘How do you know all this?’

‘In June, he moved to the Hôtel Jonard on Place des Abbesses.’

‘By then I’d lost track of him.’

‘His girlfriend wasn’t living with him.’

‘She had her own apartment on Boulevard Rochechouart, an apartment she’d inherited from her mother, who’d died a year before.’

‘Do you know the girl’s name?’

‘Yes. I asked the concierge. Her name’s Nina Lassave.’

‘Have you ever seen her again in the last twenty years?’

‘No.’

‘You never went back to Boulevard Rochechouart to find out what had become of her?’

‘Certainly not. I’d started working by then.’

She said all this in a cold, hard voice, without the slightest trace of emotion.

‘Do you know the number of the apartment block on Boulevard Rochechouart?’

‘No. It’s not very far from Place Pigalle. There’s a pharmacy on one side and a bakery and pastry shop on the other.’

‘Weren’t you surprised to learn that your husband had become a tramp?’

‘It just proves he wasn’t with her any more. How long was he in Les Halles?’

‘At least fifteen years, probably longer.’

‘Serves him right.’

He had to stop himself from smiling. She was literally brimming with hate.

‘Thank you for agreeing to see me.’

‘Now that you know how I feel, are you going to leave me alone?’

‘I’ll do my best to bother you as little as possible … You did say Nina Lassave, didn’t you? Do you know if she had a job?’

‘When their affair started, she was working in a lingerie shop in Rue Lepic. But she soon gave that up. She’d found an easier source of

income.'

'Thank you, madame.'

He said goodbye almost ceremoniously and left her alone with her long-held, long-nursed resentment.

He joined Torrence, who was reading the afternoon paper.

'Go via Rue Lepic.'

'By the workshop?'

'No. Look for a lingerie shop. I think I noticed it near the bottom of the street.'

There it was, with a narrow display window. Inside, a skinny old maid stood behind the counter, folding women's slips. She seemed surprised to see a man come into her shop on his own.

'How can I help you?'

'I'm from the Police Judiciaire. I'm looking for a woman who used to work here. How long have you had this shop?'

'Forty years, monsieur.'

'So you were here in 1945 and 1946.'

'I haven't taken three months' holiday in my life. Before, I had my sister with me, but she died last year.'

'Do you remember a Nina Lassave?'

'She worked for me for two years. She wasn't yet eighteen when she started here. A sweet young thing, quite pretty.'

'Did she ever give you cause for complaint?'

'At the end of her time here, her behaviour did bother me. I'd noticed a man waiting for her at closing time. He was a lot older than her. This went on for about two months, then she told me she had to leave me. "To get married?" I asked her, and she burst out laughing as if I'd said something very funny.'

'Did you ever see her again?'

'No. I don't know what became of her. I'm afraid she may have turned out badly. And yet, like I said before, when she started, she was so sweet, so nice.'

Maigret thanked her and went back to the car.

'So you're taking an interest in ladies' underwear now?'

'I finally have the name of Vivien's girlfriend. She worked in that shop twenty years ago. And now we're going to see the building where she lived at the time. She may still be living there, it's an apartment she inherited from her mother.'

'What's the address?'

'Boulevard Rochechouart. Not far from Pigalle. There's a pharmacy on

one side and a bakery and pastry shop on the other.'

'Got it! Was it the woman in the shop who gave you the address?'

'No. It was Madame Vivien. She literally spat it out. I've never seen so much hate as I have in that woman's eyes when she talks about her husband and his girlfriend.'

The streets and boulevards were quiet. They spotted the pharmacy first, then the bakery. Between the two, a brown-painted carriage entrance with a smaller door embedded in it. This second door was open.

Through the porch, a cobbled courtyard was visible, with a magnificent lime tree.

Maigret knocked at the door of the lodge. He glimpsed a pleasant young woman in a white apron, who came and opened the door.

'Who are you looking for?'

'Given your age, I assume you haven't been here long.'

'Well, I have been here for five years.'

'Would you still have a tenant named Nina Lassave by any chance?'

'Never heard of her.'

'Have you heard the name Vivien?'

'The man who was murdered near Les Halles? I read about it in the papers just in the last few days.'

'Do you know what became of the former concierge?'

'She retired and went back to her village. She has a son who owns a vineyard. It's near Sancerre.'

'Do you know her name?'

'Hold on … I didn't see that much of her … Michou, that's it. It's an easy name to remember, actually. Clémentine Michou.'

'Many thanks.'

And, to Torrence:

'Let's go back to headquarters.'

'Without even having a beer?'

They each had one in a bar in Rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette. Maigret was starting to see a little chink of light. Now that he had the girl's name, he was sure he'd soon track her down.

'When we get back to headquarters, I want you to go up to Records and see if we have anything on a Nina Lassave. If there's nothing, you might as well try the Vice Squad. You never know.'

'Got it.'

Back in his office, Maigret began by taking off his jacket and filling a pipe, standing by the window. In spite of everything, he wasn't

completely satisfied, and Madame Maigret would have said he was on edge.

It was true. He had conducted the investigation to the best of his ability, looking into both the present and the past. He had obtained some significant results, but he had the feeling he had missed something out. What? He couldn't put his finger on it and it made him feel uneasy.

'Could you put me through to the gendarmerie in Sancerre, mademoiselle? If he's in his office, I'll speak to the captain, of course. If he isn't there, get me someone from his office.'

He began pacing up and down. In two weeks, he told himself, this case would probably be closed, and he and his wife would be able to go and relax in their house in Meung-sur-Loire. It wasn't all that far from Sancerre.

'Hello? The captain of the Sancerre gendarmerie? … Detective Chief Inspector Maigret, Police Judiciaire … I'm sorry to bother you just for a piece of information, but it's information that may be very important. You have in your town a vineyard owner named Michou.'

'We have two. The funny thing is, they're not related.'

'One of them has probably had living with him, for about the last five years, his mother, who was a concierge in Paris for a long time.'

'Yes, Clémentine Michou.'

'Is she still living with her son?'

'She died last year.'

It was always the same thing: one step forwards, one step back.

'Would you like to talk to her son?'

'No. Only she could have answered my questions. It's a case that goes back twenty years.'

'Let me guess. The Vivien case, right? How's it going?'

'Not very well. Especially now. I was rather counting on old Madame Michou, and now it turns out she died a year ago. Anyway, many thanks, captain. What's the wine going to be like this year?'

'If this weather continues, it'll be an exceptional year.'

'I hope so. Thank you.'

He went and sat down at his desk. He had taken the call standing up, looking through the window, fascinated by a black-and-red tug pulling four barges.

'I've just come from upstairs, chief.'

'Anything?'

'Nothing on her in Records, and the boys in Vice have never heard of her.'

The telephone rang.

‘Someone who won’t give me their name, sir.’

‘Put them through anyway.’

The voice at the other end of the line sounded muffled. Whoever it was must have been speaking through a handkerchief to disguise his voice.

‘Do you want a good tip, Monsieur Maigret?’

‘About what?’

‘About the case you’re dealing with at the moment. Make a note of the name I’m going to give you: Mahossier. That’s all. It’s up to you now.’

And the man hung up.

5.

‘Torrence! Bring me the telephone directory that’s in the inspectors’ room.’

Maigret looked for the name Mahossier. He never imagined he would find eleven people of that name in Paris alone. Which of them had the anonymous caller meant?

Maigret began making telephone calls, having warned the switchboard operator that he would be asking to make a number of calls.

The first call he made, to a Mahossier whose name was not followed by his profession, went unanswered. As did the second.

Next, he ended up with a florist in Passy.

‘Is your husband there?’

‘I don’t have a husband any more. I’ve been divorced for five years.’

Next came another unresponsive number. Most Parisians were clearly on holiday.

He was next in touch with a school of shorthand and typing on Boulevard Voltaire.

Another unanswered call. That made four already. There were seven in all, and Torrence, standing by the window, was amazed at Maigret’s patience.

He didn’t call the next number – a doctor in Place des Vosges – but then came to a painting and decorating business in Avenue Trudaine.

‘Hello. Who do you want to speak to?’

‘Monsieur Mahossier, please.’

‘Monsieur Mahossier left for La Baule yesterday.’

‘Will he be away for a long time?’

‘At least three weeks. Maybe four. Who’s calling?’

‘Is this his home number?’

‘No. These are the office and workshops. Monsieur and Madame

Mahossier have an apartment in Rue de Turbigo.'

'Do they have a villa in La Baule?'

'Yes. Les Pins Parasols. They've been going there for about twelve years.'

Avenue Trudaine brought him back to Montmartre. And Rue de Turbigo was not far from Les Halles.

He began pacing up and down. Even in front of Torrence, he was a little afraid of looking ridiculous. Wouldn't it be giving too much credence to an anonymous telephone call?

'Would you call Air Inter for me? Ask them if there's a flight for La Baule tomorrow morning and if it's possible to get there and back on the same day.'

Torrence went to phone from the next office. He returned a few minutes later.

'There's a plane at 10.10 and for the return journey a plane leaves La Baule at 18.30. Should I book it for you?'

'Please.'

Mahossier … Mahossier … Maigret kept repeating the name, making an almost painful effort to remember. He knew it from somewhere. He had heard it anyway, or read it on a shop front.

He went up to the examining magistrate's office.

'Something new, Monsieur Maigret?' young Cassure asked amiably.

'Not much, except that I now know the name and former address of the young woman Vivien left his wife and daughter for.'

'What became of her?'

'The concierge of the building where she lived is new. The previous concierge retired to Sancerre and died there. The current tenants are all under forty.'

He hesitated for a moment, then took his courage in both hands.

'I've just received an anonymous telephone call.'

'A madman?'

'I don't know. It's a chance we have to take. The caller mentioned someone named Mahossier. There are eleven of them in the phone book. Seven are on holiday. Among the other four, the only one who seems like a possible suspect is a man who runs a painting and decorating business.'

'Are you going to see him?'

'With your permission. In fact, he and his wife left yesterday for La Baule, where he owns a villa. He won't be back for another three weeks. I have no proof he's involved in the case but – I don't know why – my

mind won't be at rest until I've seen him and talked to him.'

'You want to go to La Baule?'

'I have an Air Inter flight in the morning, returning to Paris late in the afternoon.'

'You're in charge of the investigation.'

'Thank you. It might be a good idea if I took a letter rogatory with me, in case he turns out to be an awkward customer.'

Examining Magistrate Cassure issued it immediately.

'Good luck, Maigret.'

He went home early, had a dinner of cold meats, cheese and salad, then spent the evening watching television. From time to time he muttered in a low voice, like an incantation:

'Mahossier … Mahossier …'

But no specific memory came back to him.

'By the way,' he told his wife, 'I won't be home for lunch tomorrow.'

'Do you have a lot of work?'

'Not particularly, but I have to go to La Baule.'

'La Baule?'

'Yes. There's someone there I think I need to see. I'm going by plane and coming back the same way. I'll be back about eight thirty.'

He knew from experience that many criminals are only arrested thanks to an anonymous phone call or a tip-off from an informer.

When he woke up, the sun was already high, still as bright, and there wasn't a breath of air. He was pleased: he didn't particularly like travelling by plane, which always gave him a feeling of confinement.

'See you this evening.'

'You may have time to bathe in the sea,' she joked.

She was referring to the fact that Maigret couldn't swim. It was one of the reasons they never took their holidays by the sea but always in the country.

The plane was a small two-propeller craft that looked like a toy next to the huge transatlantic machines. It could only carry eight passengers. Maigret looked at them vaguely. There were two children who couldn't keep still and wouldn't stop talking.

He tried to nap but couldn't. At last, after a two-hour flight, the plane touched down in the airfield at La Baule. For some time now, the sea had been visible, sparkling down below, and, in the distance, a ship that seemed to be following the horizon.

He found a taxi.

'Do you know a villa called Les Pins Parasols?'

‘Do you have the address?’

‘No.’

‘What about the name of the people who live there?’

‘Yes. Mahossier. Louis Mahossier.’

‘Hold on a minute.’

The driver walked over to a little bar, where he looked through the local telephone directory.

‘Got it!’ he announced, coming back.

‘Is it far?’

‘Behind the Hôtel Hermitage.’

The sense of disorientation was total. Here, the men were in shorts, with shirts open on their chests. All along the beach, which stretched for several kilometres, there were rows of parasols, and thousands of holidaymakers were baking in the sun while others bathed in the sea.

The villa was a large one, located down a well-shaded drive, quite far from the road.

Maigret looked for a bell but couldn’t see one. The white-painted door was ajar. There was a garden table and chairs on the terrace.

He opened the door by a few centimetres and called out:

‘Is anyone at home?’

There was no response at first. It was only when he called out for the third time that a very young maid in a white apron emerged from the gloom of the corridor.

‘What is it?’

‘I’d like a word with Monsieur Mahossier.’

‘At this time, monsieur and madame are on the beach. If you’d like to come back this afternoon …’

‘I’d rather see them now on the beach.’

‘Do you know them?’

‘No.’

‘At the end of the first street on the left, there are stone steps going down to the beach. Their hut’s the fourth one. It has the number twenty-four printed on the canvas.’

‘Could you come and point out your employers to me?’

‘I can’t leave the villa unattended.’

‘How old is Monsieur Mahossier?’

‘I don’t know exactly. I only work for them during the holidays. Fifty, maybe?’

‘What does he look like?’

‘He’s still a handsome man, very tall, very thin, with grey hair around

the ears.'

'And Madame Mahossier?'

'She's much younger. Probably no more than forty, I'd say.'

'What number hut did you say?'

'Twenty-four.'

Families were passing, already in their bathing costumes, some with skin peeled by the sun.

He found the steps down to the beach and made his way between the bodies lying on the sand. He had no difficulty in finding the orange canvas hut that bore the number twenty-four.

Outside it, a woman whose face could not be seen was lying on her stomach. Her back, coated with tanning lotion, was glossy in the sun.

He looked around him in search of a man likely to be Louis Mahossier. Not far from the place where the sea lazily licked the beach, some twenty men, in a row, were doing physical exercises, led by an instructor. One of them was taller and thinner than the others. Was he Mahossier?

Maigret couldn't interrupt the lesson. He stood there, one metre from the woman outside hut twenty-four. Would she eventually become aware of his presence? She readjusted the top of her two-piece bathing costume, not much less skimpy than a bikini, and turned on her side.

She seemed surprised to see a man in a suit standing near her. Maigret must have been the only person dressed like that on the whole beach.

'Are you looking for something?' she asked.

Her face was coated with oil or ointment. She was quite plump and seemed to be of a cheerful disposition.

'Madame Mahossier?'

'Yes. How did you know?'

'Your maid gave me the number of your hut. I'd like a word with your husband.'

'You'll have to wait. What time is it?'

'Nearly twelve thirty.'

'In a few minutes, he'll have finished his workout.'

'He's the tallest one, isn't he?'

'Yes. The third on the right. He may be thin, with not a gramme of fat on him, but when we're in La Baule he never misses his exercises.'

She was looking at him curiously and didn't dare ask him questions that were too direct.

'Did you get here this morning?'

'Yes.'

‘By car?’

‘By plane.’

‘We’d take the plane, too, if we didn’t need the car here. Are you staying at the Hermitage?’

‘I’m not staying in a hotel. I’m leaving again this afternoon.’

The workout was over, and the tall, thin man came walking towards the canvas hut. He frowned when he saw Maigret in conversation with his wife.

‘This is someone who’s come from Paris to see you. He flew here this morning and is leaving again this afternoon.’

Mahossier clearly didn’t like this.

‘Monsieur …?’

‘Maigret, Police Judiciaire.’

‘And I’m the person you want to speak to?’

‘Yes, I’d like to ask you a few questions.’

He answered the description he had been given of the man who had left Pharamond’s, had stood watching Vivien unloading vegetables and was later seen in Impasse du Vieux-Four, entering the dilapidated building where the tramp had sought refuge.

‘You own a painting and decorating business, is that right?’

‘Yes.’

This interview he was initiating was quite strange, because of the setting, the commotion of the beach, the cries of children and, last but not least, the fact that the man he was interviewing was in bathing trunks.

‘How long have you had it?’

‘About fifteen years.’

‘And before?’

‘I worked for an employer.’

‘Also in Montmartre?’

‘What’s the point of these questions, inspector? I’m here on holiday. I don’t see what right you have to come bothering me.’

Maigret showed him the letter rogatory, which he read carefully.

‘What’s this all about?’

‘A few days ago, you had dinner at Pharamond’s in Les Halles.’

He looked at his wife as if asking her to refresh his memory.

‘That was the evening my mother came over to have dinner with me. As you can’t stand her, you decided to have dinner out.’

‘What did you do after that?’

‘I went for a walk and then I went home.’

Maigret saw Madame Mahossier's cheeks flush slightly. She opened her mouth to say something but changed her mind.

'Yes, you did in fact go home for a while.'

And looking the man straight in the eyes, Maigret asked point-blank:

'What calibre is your gun?'

'I don't own a gun.'

'Be careful, Monsieur Mahossier. I warn you not to tell a lie that might come back to harm you. If you don't give me an honest answer, I'll ask for a warrant to search your workshop as well as your apartment in Rue de Turbigo.'

The woman was looking at her husband in amazement. As for Mahossier himself, a hard look had come into his eyes, and it seemed as if he might throw himself on Maigret.

'Yes, I do have an old automatic, but it must be rusty, and I don't even know where I put it.'

'.32 calibre?'

'I suppose so. I don't know much about guns.'

'It's a pity you don't know where you put it. You could have asked one of your staff to hand it over to me.'

'Once again, do you mind telling me what this is all about?'

'It's about something very serious, Monsieur Mahossier, a murder in fact. When I find your gun, I'll know in a few hours, thanks to our ballistics department, whether or not you're involved.'

'Do whatever you like. I'm not even going to answer any more of your ridiculous questions.'

He shook hands with a fat man in a bathing suit who passed by and went and lay down three huts further on.

'Twenty years ago, you made the acquaintance of a young woman named Nina Lassave, didn't you? Then, through her, you met Marcel Vivien.'

'The tramp from Les Halles?'

'He wasn't a tramp in those days. He had a cabinetmaking workshop in Rue Lepic.'

'Am I supposed to know that?'

'Yes.'

'Sorry to disappoint you, but I don't know these people.'

'What about Boulevard Rochechouart?'

This was definitely the first time Maigret had ever interrogated anyone on a beach. Mahossier's wife had lifted herself on to one elbow and was following the interview with obvious interest.

‘Like all Parisians, I know Boulevard Rochechouart, of course.’

‘Where were you living in 1946?’

‘It’s a long time ago. I moved about a lot in those days. I mainly lived in small hotels.’

‘In Montmartre.’

‘Yes. My employer had his business in the neighbourhood.’

‘The Hôtel du Morvan?’

‘I don’t remember.’

‘The Hôtel Jonard on Place des Abbesses?’

‘Maybe.’

‘Was there a time during that summer when you had your meals at La Bonne Fourchette in Rue Dancourt? Old man Boutant is still alive and could identify you. He has an excellent memory.’

‘I don’t know about any of this.’

‘You don’t know that restaurant?’

‘It’s possible I had lunch or dinner there once or twice. Do you have many more questions to ask me?’

‘Not many. Especially if they get evasive answers. I assume you can tell me what year you got married?’

‘1955.’

‘Had you broken up with Nina by then?’

‘You’re out of your mind, inspector.’

‘Haven’t you remembered about the gun yet? Do you still not know where you put it?’

‘I don’t even know if I still have it.’

‘When did you buy it?’

‘I didn’t buy it. One of my workers gave it to me. He has two children and he didn’t like having a weapon at home.’

‘Do you still have this worker?’

‘Yes.’

‘What’s his name?’

‘Oscar Raison. He’ll be there on Avenue Trudaine. He was one of the first people to start working for me. This time, I hope you have nothing more to ask me?’

‘No, nothing. Thank you for your help. I’m sorry, madame, if I spoiled your sunbathing.’

She didn’t reply but looked at her husband with a questioning air.

In a side street, Maigret found a little Italian restaurant where on a sudden whim, seeing the oven, he decided to have a pizza. While waiting for it, he ordered some seafood and a bottle of Muscadet, as

there were no half-bottles.

He was calm and serious. He had the feeling he hadn't wasted his day. After having his coffee, he took a taxi to Saint-Nazaire, where he was sure there would be a branch of the Police Judiciaire. He checked with the town hall and was sent to Nantes. There he found just three inspectors in fairly cramped premises.

The three men recognized him and were clearly surprised to see him.

'Is La Baule part of your territory?'

'Yes. But we're not called out there often. Nothing ever happens there. It's a family resort.'

'I'd like a man who's spending his holidays there right now to be watched day and night. Is that possible?'

'Anything's possible, obviously. But there aren't many of us.'

Maigret showed them the letter rogatory.

'We'll do whatever you ask, chief.'

He described Louis Mahossier and his wife and gave their address.

'If either of them leaves La Baule, I'd like to be phoned immediately, at home if necessary.'

He gave his home telephone number.

'Of course, I'd also like to know which direction they went in.'

'All right, chief. Will you come and have a glass of Muscadet with us?'

'I've just had one. My doctor tells me I should cut down.'

He left them and returned to La Baule by taxi. On the embankment were a few men dressed, like him, in city clothes, and they were carrying their jackets over their arms. He followed their example.

From Orly, he took a taxi straight home. Madame Maigret was waiting for him on the landing. She couldn't help laughing.

'How would it be if you spent a month by the sea?'

'What do you mean?'

'You weren't even there a day and you've really caught the sun. Go and look at yourself in the mirror.'

It was true. Maigret's face was red. And he was in a hurry to take off his shoes, which were full of sand. He hadn't been able to resist the childish desire to walk the length of the beach, one metre from where little white waves lapped the shore. He had walked for almost two hours like that, in a noisy, colourful universe, dodging balls thrown by children as best he could.

'Have you had dinner?'

'I had something on the plane. I have to phone headquarters.'

He was put through to the inspectors' room and was surprised to hear Janvier's voice.

'Are you still in the office?'

'There was a post-office raid, and we've had a lot of work. We've arrested the two main perpetrators and recovered the money. The third man, who was the lookout, is still on the run. How about you, chief?'

'It'll be a few days before I know if my journey was worth the trouble. In the meantime, do you have two inspectors who can each do a stakeout, starting this evening?'

'I think I do, though we're down to a skeleton team right now.'

'Write this down. Avenue Trudaine, near the Lycée Rollin. The premises of Louis Mahossier, who runs a painting and decorating business. I haven't the slightest idea what might happen, but I'll feel more at ease knowing the place is under surveillance. The second stakeout is outside the apartment of the same Mahossier, in Rue de Turbigo. The apartment isn't empty. An elderly cook is alone there at the moment.'

'Got it. What do we do if Mahossier shows up at one of these two places?'

'Follow him and keep track of where he goes and what he does.'

Maigret slept badly because as soon as he started sweating his face began to tingle. He still had the noise of the sea in his ears and he felt as if the bright colours of the beach had imprinted themselves on his retinas.

The next day, he woke up early again and took a taxi to Rue de Turbigo. It was one of those old buildings in the Marais that had been restored and on the outside looked again like what it had once been: a rich man's mansion.

'Excuse me, madame. Monsieur Mahossier's apartment, please.'

'He isn't here. He and his wife are in La Baule, where they have a villa.'

'I know. But I also know that the cook, Mademoiselle Berthe, is in.'

'As you wish. First floor on the right. Actually, it doesn't matter if you turn right or left, they have the whole floor.'

There was no lift, but the staircase was wide and not too steep. He rang the bell beside a door of old polished wood. It took a long time before there was any response. At last, there were muted footsteps in the apartment, and the door opened.

'Monsieur and Madame Mahossier are—'

'In La Baule, I know. It's you I'm here to see.'

‘Me?’

‘You are Mademoiselle Berthe, the cook?’

‘Come in. Don’t stand out on the landing.’

She admitted him to a very large drawing room, lit by three tall windows and furnished more or less in the style of the building.

‘Please sit down. Are you selling vacuum cleaners?’

‘No. I’m from the Police Judiciaire.’

She looked him up and down shamelessly. She was clearly a woman who feared nothing and would always speak her mind.

‘You’re not Inspector Maigret, are you?’

‘Yes, I am.’

‘Are you dealing with that tramp whose name I forget? I don’t have a good memory for names these days.’

‘Vivien.’

‘That’s right. It’s a strange idea to kill a tramp, don’t you think? Unless he was one of those fake tramps who hide their money in their mattress.’

‘That’s not the case on this occasion. I saw your employer in La Baule yesterday.’

‘Oh!’

‘Did you know him before he was married?’

‘I first met him when he was engaged to Mademoiselle Cassegrain. I’ve worked for them ever since. Monsieur Cassegrain is a notary, on Avenue de Villiers. His wife is often ill. There was a maid to look after her and do the cooking. It was Monsieur Cassegrain who insisted I stay with his daughter when she got married.’

‘How long ago was that?’

‘About fifteen years. The difference here is that there’s no maid, and I do everything. Actually, that’s not quite true. Madame helps me a lot and she’s as good a cook as I am.’

‘Do they go out a lot?’

‘Not often, and then just to the theatre or the cinema. They have a few friends round sometimes, always the same ones.’

‘Do they get on well?’

‘They don’t argue over every little thing, if that’s what you’re asking.’

‘Do you think they still love each other?’

Her reply was in her silence.

‘Is Monsieur Mahossier having an affair?’

‘I don’t know. He certainly wouldn’t tell me if he was.’

‘Does he sometimes go out alone in the evening and get back very

late?'

'No, never. Though actually, it did happen last week. At about eleven, when madame was out – her mother had had dinner here, and she was seeing her home – he came rushing back and went straight to his room. Then he went back out as quickly as he'd come in. When madame got back, she decided not to wait up for him and went to bed. I don't know if she heard him come in, because he made as little noise as possible. But I know it was after three in the morning.'

'How long have they slept in separate bedrooms?'

'Since after the first few months. Monsieur gets up very early, so that he can be on site early. That used to wake madame up, and she likes to stay in bed until mid-morning.'

You just had to watch her as she spoke about Mahossier to realize that she didn't like him, whereas she spoke about her mistress with real adoration.

'How old was she when she got married?'

'She was a month over twenty.'

'Do you know where they met?'

'No. She used to go out a lot when she was a girl. These days, girls go out without chaperones.'

'Is she happy?'

Another eloquent silence.

'Has her marriage been a disappointment to her?'

'She's not the kind of woman who complains or puts on a show of being upset. She takes life as it comes.'

Maigret spotted a photograph of the couple on the piano. In it, Louis Mahossier had a moustache he had since abandoned. As for the woman, she had very curly blonde hair.

Following the direction of Maigret's gaze, the cook asked suddenly:

'What has he done?'

'Why do you ask that? He hasn't necessarily done anything.'

'You wouldn't be here if he was blameless. When a man like you goes out of his way …'

'Would you mind showing me his room?'

'If he knew, he'd be furious, but I don't care. I'm not afraid of him.'

They walked through the dining room, then along a corridor.

'Here,' she said, opening a door, 'This is madame's room.'

It was cheerful-looking, all in pale greys with a little blue. The white carpet was the kind into which your feet would sink.

Mahossier's room, which was next door, was more sober, of course,

but in good taste.

'Who chose the furniture and fittings?'

'Madame. She attended art history courses at the Louvre and also went to the École des arts décoratifs.'

'Is she the one who plays the piano?'

'Yes. Only when she's alone.'

Here, everything was beige and brown.

'Tell me, does Mahossier own a gun?'

'Yes. I saw it just two weeks ago.'

'Is it one with a barrel?'

'You mean with a kind of cylinder you put the bullets in?'

'Yes.'

'No. It's a flat revolver.'

'An automatic.'

'See for yourself.'

She went to the night table and opened the top drawer. A look of surprise came over her face.

'It's not there.'

'Could he have taken it with him to La Baule?'

'Definitely not. I was the one who packed the bags.'

'Could he have put it somewhere else?'

She opened the other two drawers, which contained keys, a penknife and membership cards for various clubs.

'Ever since I've been here, that gun has always been in this drawer.'

'And you say you saw it two weeks ago? Were there any cartridges in the drawer?'

'There was a box full of them. That's gone, too.'

She looked in the cupboards, in the chest of drawers and even in the bathroom.

When she looked at Maigret again, her face was grave and a little pale.

'I'm starting to guess why you're here.'

'Does it surprise you?'

'A little. Not so much. The reason I'm going to give you will probably make you laugh. He doesn't like animals. He won't have a dog or a cat in the apartment. Madame had a cocker spaniel that kept her company, and he forced her to get rid of it.'

'I think it'd be best if you don't leave Paris in the next few days. I may need you quite soon.'

'I'll be here.'

And after a moment, as she led him back to the drawing room:

'Did you see madame in La Baule?'

'Yes.'

'I bet she was sunbathing.'

'Yes, she was.'

'When she's by the sea, she spends her days in the sun. She used to go to La Baule with her parents when she was a child.'

'Don't they want children?'

'They haven't confided in me, but I don't think they care much about that.'

'Thank you, Mademoiselle Berthe. You've been very helpful.'

'I've done my best to help you.'

She didn't add: 'And to put my boss in a difficult situation.'

A taxi took him back to Quai des Orfèvres. Torrence told him there had been a telephone call from Nantes. No developments at the villa Les Pins Parasols. They were asking if they should continue with the stakeout.

'Call them and tell them yes.'

'Did you send men where I told you?' he asked Janvier, who was at his post.

He was often quite informal with Janvier, and sometimes also with Lapointe, the newest member of the team. With the others, he maintained a certain formality, except sometimes when he was distracted or under pressure.

'Who did you send to Rue de Turbigo? Whoever it was is well hidden, I've just come back from there and didn't see anyone. True, there's a bistro just opposite the building.'

'It's Baron who's there. Neveu is in Montmartre.'

Maigret headed for the corridor where the examining magistrates had their offices and knocked at Cassure's door. The magistrate called out for him to come in.

'Any news?'

'In a way, yes. I even think it's worth signing a custody order.'

'Tell me all about it.'

And Maigret, sitting down on an uncomfortable chair, started telling him about his travels of the last two days.

'I definitely don't know for sure that Mahossier murdered Vivien, but I think we have enough on him to bring him in for questioning and not have to do it on a beach.'

'I think so, too. How will you go about it? Will you send two men to

fetch him or will you ask the local gendarmerie to handle it?'

'I'll send two men, if I find any available. We're working with such a reduced staff that if the criminals found out they'd have a field day.'

'I'll sign the custody order for you.'

He filled out a form that Maigret knew well.

'First name?'

'Louis.'

'Mahossier with an *h*? I don't know why I feel like putting an *r* instead.'

'Thank you.'

'Have you been to Avenue Trudaine?'

'I'm planning to go there this morning.'

He went back to see Janvier.

'I absolutely need two men.'

Poor Janvier didn't know where to turn.

'Do you need them for long?'

'Long enough to fetch someone from La Baule.'

He looked Maigret in the eyes, and they understood each other.

'Got it! Take Véran and Loubet.'

Maigret led both of them to his office, gave them instructions and handed over the custody order.

'There's a plane in an hour. You can take it, but I'd rather you came back by train.'

'Should we handcuff him?'

'If he looks like he's planning to run away, yes. Otherwise, I don't think there's any point.'

He called Torrence.

'Come on, driver.'

That was indeed pretty much all Torrence had been doing in the last few days.

'Avenue Trudaine. Opposite the Lycée Rollin.'

'Are you arresting him?'

'Taking him into custody. We'll decide what to do once I've questioned him a little more seriously than I could on the beach.'

There was a large yard cluttered with ladders and a kind of garage full of huge cans of paint. On an enamel nameplate was the word 'Office' and an arrow, which Maigret followed.

There was only one room, quite large, where a short, grumpy-looking man sat bent over invoices.

'Detective Chief Inspector Maigret.'

‘Is it me you want to talk to?’

‘What’s your name?’

‘Vannier. Gérard Vannier, and I don’t see what the police—’

‘This isn’t about you.’

‘One of our workers? They’re all out on jobs. They’re hard-working people, they’ve all been with us for several years.’

‘Is this desk on the left your boss’s?’

‘Yes. He’s not there often, he’s always out on one site or another.’

‘Is the business doing well?’

‘We can’t complain.’

‘Are you a partner?’

‘Unfortunately not. I’m just the accountant.’

‘When was the business established?’

‘That I don’t know. What I do know is that in 1947 the then owner went bankrupt. That’s because he spent most of his time in bistros, and there was a lot of waste. Monsieur Mahossier took over and changed all the staff.’

‘And you?’

‘At first, he only needed an accountant two evenings a week. Then, as the business expanded, he took me on full time, around the end of 1948.’

‘Does he work hard?’

‘Everything goes through him. He barely even has time for lunch.’

‘How is he with the men?’

‘He’s very friendly with them, but there’s a line they can’t cross, and they know that.’

‘How many workers are there?’

‘Eight at the moment. That’s including the apprentice.’

‘Have you ever seen a gun in the desk?’

‘A gun? No. What would we want with a gun? The money comes in mostly in the form of cheques, and they’re paid straight into the bank that’s on the corner of the avenue.’

‘Do you mind?’

Much to the little man’s indignation, he went straight to Mahossier’s desk and opened the drawers one by one. There was no gun in any of them.

‘Why exactly are you here?’

‘It’s in connection with an investigation of mine.’

‘When Monsieur Mahossier finds out—’

‘I saw him yesterday.’

‘You went to La Baule?’

‘Yes, and by tomorrow morning at the latest he’ll be in Paris.’

‘He wasn’t supposed to be back for another three weeks or a month.’

‘I asked him to change his mind.’

‘Didn’t he object?’

Little Monsieur Vannier was on his high horse by now.

‘I’d like to know what this is all about.’

‘You’ll soon find out.’

‘Opening drawers as if this was your home. Asking ridiculous questions. And claiming you’ve made the boss come back from La Baule …’

Maigret left without saying another word, leaving the fellow to continue his tirade.

6.

Maigret had just got back to headquarters when he received a phone call from La Baule. It was Véran, one of the two inspectors he had sent there to fetch Mahossier.

'How did it go?'

'Quite badly at first. He started by looking down his nose at us and refusing to come with us to Paris. He said he had friends in high places and he'd start an almighty row.'

'How did his wife react?'

'She was listening, looking surprised. I let him argue for a few minutes, then took the handcuffs from my pocket and told him that if he didn't come quietly he'd have these things on his wrists for the whole journey. His face turned red. "You'd dare do that?" "Yes." "But why, for God's sake?" I think what hurt him most was being humiliated. In the end he went with us to the station to catch the night train. His wife wanted to come along, but he refused, telling her he'd be back within forty-eight hours. "They have nothing they can pin on me, do you understand? They're the ones who'll end up looking stupid."'

The following morning, Maigret took his seat at his desk, chose a pipe, filled it slowly and motioned to Torrence to sit at the end of the table with a notepad. Usually, or as often as possible, it was Lapointe who recorded interrogations, since he was the best stenographer in the Police Judiciaire, but Torrence didn't do too badly.

Maigret pushed a button, and Véran brought Mahossier in. His features were hard, his eyes fixed.

'Take a seat.'

'I object to this arrest. There's no justification for it, and I reserve the right to file a complaint, even if you are Maigret.'

Maigret didn't flinch.

'Do you mind telling me, Monsieur Mahossier, where your gun is?'

‘What gun?’

‘The one that was still in the top drawer of your night table a few days ago. A .32 calibre, unless I’m mistaken.’

‘I don’t know anything about guns and I couldn’t tell you what calibre that one is. It was given to me a long time ago.’

‘Where is it now?’

‘In the same drawer, probably.’

There was a bad-tempered tone in his voice, and when he looked at Maigret his eyes expressed intense hatred. But wasn’t there also fear in those eyes?

‘The gun isn’t in the drawer any more. What have you done with it?’

‘I’m not the only one with access to the apartment.’

‘You mean Mademoiselle Berthe might have grabbed it? Please don’t make jokes. It won’t get you anywhere.’

‘I didn’t say it was the cook who took it.’

‘Could it have been your mother-in-law? She was in your home the night you had dinner alone at Pharamond’s and got home at three in the morning.’

‘I’ve never got home at three in the morning.’

‘Would you like me to bring in the witness who got a good look at you and is sure to recognize you?’

Torrence was writing as quickly as he could, his forehead bathed in sweat.

‘Not only did someone I have here see you enter a building in Impasse du Vieux-Four just before three o’clock, but another witness heard you come home a few minutes after that hour.’

‘My wife, I suppose?’ The tone was ironic.

‘If it was your wife, she wouldn’t be able to testify against you.’

Maigret, unlike Mahossier, was very calm.

‘So it’s that old bitch Berthe. Just because she was slightly involved in raising my wife, she’s so jealous of anyone else going near her that she can’t stand me.’

‘Where did you meet Marcel Vivien?’

‘I don’t know who you mean.’

‘Don’t you read the papers?’

‘I don’t take any notice of the human interest stories.’

‘But you know he was murdered, don’t you? He was asleep in his bed when he was shot three times in the chest.’

‘Is that any concern of mine?’

‘It might be. It would be wonderful if you could find your gun.’

‘I’d first have to find out who took it or moved it.’

He was the kind of man who would deny things in the face of all the evidence. As he lit a cigarette, his hand shook. It might have been with anger.

‘I don’t suppose you’ve ever been in Impasse du Vieux-Four?’

‘I couldn’t even tell you where it is.’

Maigret abruptly changed the subject, throwing Mahossier.

‘What became of Nina Lassave?’

‘Am I supposed to know her? The name doesn’t mean anything to me.’

‘In 1945 and 1946 you were living in Montmartre, in a hotel not far from Boulevard Rochechouart.’

‘I used to live round there, but I don’t remember what year it was.’

‘Nina had an apartment in Boulevard Rochechouart.’

‘It’s possible. So did lots of people. Am I supposed to know them, too?’

‘It’s likely you met her and Marcel Vivien, who was her lover. Think before you answer. Were you also Nina Lassave’s lover?’

‘I don’t need to think. The answer’s no. I wasn’t married yet, and I had a few girlfriends at the time, but she wasn’t one of them, and I’ve never met anyone called Marcel Vivien.’

‘So you have nothing to do with any of this?’

‘Nothing at all.’

He was becoming insolent, but he was also growing increasingly nervous and couldn’t stop his hands shaking.

‘To give you time to think, I’m going to send you to the cells.’

‘You have no right.’

‘You’re forgetting the custody order, duly signed by the examining magistrate.’

‘If you’re planning to question me again, I want my lawyer present.’

‘I could refuse. Your lawyer can step in when you’re with the examining magistrate. But I want to give you every chance. What’s his name?’

‘Maître Loiseau. His address is 38, Boulevard Beaumarchais.’

‘I’ll inform him in good time.’

Maigret stood up and walked heavily over to the window, which was open on a maddeningly blue sky. Except for those on the beaches, everyone was desperate for rain, but still it wouldn’t fall. If anything, the temperature was rising.

Inspector Véran led Mahossier to his cell.

‘He’ll get what’s coming to him,’ the man muttered, presumably referring to Maigret.

Maigret, for his part, said to Torrence:

'He's tough. Type up the notes you took. We'll get him to sign the statement next time.'

'Do you really think he knew Nina Lassave?'

'It's possible. I was just putting feelers out, but I think I got a reaction. He wasn't expecting me to talk about her.'

He changed pipes and put on his hat.

'If I'm needed urgently, I'll be at the offices of the *Parisien libéré*.'

Torrence looked at him in surprise but said nothing. Maigret began by having a beer at the Brasserie Dauphine, then hailed a taxi.

'To the *Parisien libéré*.'

He remembered that it had been one of the first newspapers to appear after the Liberation. He himself hadn't been in Paris in 1946. That was the time when he had done something to displease the then commissioner of the Police Judiciaire, who had retired a few months later. He had been sent to Luçon, where there was very little to do, and in order to kill time he had played billiards almost all day long. He had moped there for nearly a year. Madame Maigret, too, had found it hard to adjust to life in the Vendée.

Fortunately, the new commissioner had recalled him to Paris. He wasn't yet a detective chief inspector and didn't yet lead the Crime Squad.

That period in Luçon was a kind of gap in his career and in his memories.

'I'd like to speak to the editor.'

'Who shall I say?'

'Detective Chief Inspector Maigret.'

The editor, whom he didn't know and who was very young, came out of his office to greet him.

'To what do I owe the honour?'

'It's a work matter.'

'How can we help you?'

'I assume you keep all issues of your paper?'

'Of course. They're classified by year.'

'I'd like to look at the years 1945 and 1946.'

'Come with me.'

They went down tortuous corridors and finally came to a dark room where rows of huge tomes bound in black canvas sat on shelves.

'Would you like someone to help you?'

'I don't think it'll be necessary. Especially as it may take hours.'

This was something Maigret should have done at the beginning of the investigation. He had thought about it briefly, then it had gone out of his head.

'I can have some beer brought up for you. The bistro opposite is used to it.'

'I've just had a drink, thanks.'

Once alone, he took off his jacket, rolled up his shirt-sleeves and looked for the volume for the year 1945.

After an hour, he had finished with that year. Of course, he read only the headlines. None of them seemed to refer to Marcel Vivien, Nina Lassave or Louis Mahossier.

He went and put back the volume and, with a heavy head, started on the year 1946. Twice, the editor came to make sure he didn't need anything.

'Still not hungry?'

'I could certainly do with a beer now.'

The air was blue with pipe smoke. The room smelled of old paper and printer's ink.

There were headlines that surprised him, cases that had created a lot of stir in their day and were now completely forgotten.

January … February … March … April …

He eventually came to August. And finally, dated 17 August, there was the headline:

Young woman strangled on Boulevard Rochechouart

It wasn't in bold lettering, or even on the first page. Nobody seemed to have attached much importance to the story.

A young woman of 22, Nina Lassave, was found strangled in the bedroom of her apartment on Boulevard Rochechouart. She was lying naked on her bed. Nothing had been disturbed in either the room or the rest of the apartment. The concierge, when questioned, was unable to provide any information that might help the investigators.

For several years, Nina Lassave worked as an assistant in a lingerie shop in Rue Lepic, where the owner was very pleased with her work.

It was at the end of 1945 that she suddenly stopped working. There was a man in her life, but he seldom came to see her at

home. What happened the night she died? That is what the investigation must try to establish, but it will not be an easy task. The concierge is quite elderly and does not take much notice of comings and goings in the building.

Chief Inspector Piedbœuf is in charge of the investigation.

The following issue featured the headline:

No new developments in Boulevard Rochechouart murder

Only a few lines to say that the police were looking further into the victim's private life. The pathologist's report established that she had indeed died from strangulation, but had not been sexually assaulted.

The concierge had been questioned again. She had confirmed that a man who appeared relatively young sometimes came back with her and went up to her apartment, but never spent the night there.

She had caught sight of him once or twice. But she would find it difficult to recognize him. For about two months, another man, this one easier to describe, had been coming to see her in the afternoon and, the light being better, the concierge had got a good look at him.

He was very tall and very thin, with blue eyes. He would climb the stairs four at a time and leave alone an hour later.

It was only three days later that the *Parisien libéré* announced:

Suspect has been questioned by Chief Inspector Piedbœuf

Not much is being revealed about the interrogations that have been taking place at the Police Judiciaire. We do know, however, that the tall, thin man who came several times to Nina Lassave's apartment on Boulevard Rochechouart has been identified as one Louis M …, a house painter, who lives in a small hotel in the neighbourhood.

He does not deny having been the young woman's lover but claims he did not see her on the day she died. The concierge, though, has stated that she was on the stairs when he came to see Nina Lassave that day at about four in the afternoon.

Due to lack of evidence, M … has been released, although the police are continuing to investigate him.

As for cabinetmaker Marcel V …, who had been Nina Lassave's lover for more than six months, he has been able to establish that he was in a café on Boulevard de la Chapelle at the time of the

murder.

Maigret was taking notes in his old black notebook. A waiter from a local brasserie had brought him a nice frothy beer, and the interest he was taking in what the newspaper was revealing to him had made his headache go away.

He tried to walk back to the editor's office but got lost in the corridors and had to ask for directions.

'Would you mind my having someone photograph a number of articles in your archives?'

'Not at all.'

'Is it all right if I use your phone?'

He got through to Moers.

'Is Mestral there? … Could you send him to the *Parisien libéré* for me? In the offices, he should ask for the archives. I'll be there.'

Maigret went back to his seat and continued leafing through old issues of the newspaper. Nina Lassave was mentioned less and less, and then only in a few lines, because a big political trial had grabbed all the attention at the time.

> It now appears that Louis M …, whom the concierge thinks she saw going up to Nina Lassave's apartment at about four in the afternoon, also has an alibi. Chief Inspector Piedbœuf is continuing his investigation, as are his inspectors, but it does not seem as if anything new has been discovered.

That was almost the end of the Boulevard Rochechouart murder case as far as the newspaper was concerned. No photographs had been published of either Mahossier or Marcel Vivien.

Mahossier had been questioned two or three more times at Quai des Orfèvres. He had been taken to see Examining Magistrate Coméliau, who was still alive at the time, but no charges had been brought against him.

Mestral arrived half an hour later with a whole battery of cameras and flashes.

'Are there a lot of pages to photograph?'

'Only half a dozen fairly short articles.'

Maigret watched him go about his task, pointing out the articles as he went along.

'Will it be possible to have the prints in the course of the afternoon?'

‘Let’s say about four, if I’m allowed to have lunch.’

Maigret went to thank the editor.

‘Did you find what you were looking for?’

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t suppose we can talk about it yet?’

‘When the time comes, I promise you’ll have the scoop.’

‘Thanks. I hope to hear from you soon.’

It was just after midday. From Rue d’Enghien to Boulevard Richard-Lenoir was only fifteen minutes’ walk, and Maigret, in a good mood, looked at the passers-by, the shop windows and the coaches as he walked. There were two or three coaches at the Bastille, which the foreigners were photographing as they had photographed the Arc de Triomphe, Sacré-Cœur and the Eiffel Tower. Most looked tired but didn’t want to miss any of the sights they had been promised.

He was humming as he walked into his apartment.

‘I get the feeling things are going better,’ Madame Maigret said as she served the starter.

‘I think I’ve done a good job. I don’t yet know what the result will be, but there’s sure to be one. A pity there’s a man who can’t talk any more.’

‘Who?’

‘Marcel Vivien. By the way, I know something new that I have no reason to hide. Nina Lassave was murdered in her apartment in August 1946.’

‘Shot?’

‘Strangled.’

‘No wonder you couldn’t find her!’

‘Precisely. I’ve been questioning Mahossier, but he’s clamming up more and more.’

He ate heartily. There was a leg of lamb, a lovely pink colour, with just a hint of blood near the bone.

‘It’s wonderful,’ he sighed, taking another slice.

‘Do you think you’re getting to the end?’

‘I can’t say yet, but we’ve come quite a long way. The funniest thing is that what I discovered this morning in the archives of the *Parisien libéré* is probably in the files at headquarters, in much greater detail. The only reason I didn’t think of looking there is that we were in Luçon at the time.’

‘I’ve never been so bored in my life.’

‘What about me?’

‘Would you like a peach? They’re very ripe and juicy.’

‘A peach would be fine.’

He was at peace with the world and himself.

This time, he took a taxi back to the office. The windows were wide open, as they had been on the previous days, and there was the occasional breath of cooler air playing about the room.

‘Torrence!’

‘Yes, chief.’

‘Have you finished typing up the transcript?’

‘I finished before lunch.’

‘Could you bring me a copy?’

When he had it on his desk, he continued:

‘I want you to go up to Records. In the files for 1946, there must be one about the murder of Nina Lassave in Boulevard Rochechouart.’

‘I thought I recognized that name. It’s coming back to me now. It was Chief Inspector Piedbœuf who dealt with it.’

‘Exactly. I’d like the file as soon as possible.’

With only the occasional pause for thought or to relight his pipe, he reread, word for word, the questions he had asked Mahossier that morning and his answers. Each sentence was important in its own way. As set down in black and white, Mahossier’s words appeared much more confused than when they had been spoken out loud.

When he had finished, Maigret sat motionless, eyes half closed. Anyone would have thought he was dozing, but his mind was more active than ever. He was trying to remember the smallest details of his investigation, stringing together the disparate parts.

He was in no hurry to bring things to a conclusion. All at once, he decided to call Ascan, the chief inspector from the first arrondissement.

‘Sorry, Maigret, my men haven’t found anything new.’

‘That’s not why I’m calling. If possible, I’d like them to get their hands back on the two tramps I questioned in your station, the man and the woman. If they do find them, would you be so kind as to send them both to me?’

‘You may end up with fleas.’

‘It wouldn’t be the first time. It’s one of the risks of the job.’

‘In this neighbourhood, we get more than our fair share. When would you like them?’

‘About four, if possible.’

‘We’ll try. I have just the men we need for that.’

Maigret asked the switchboard operator to put him through to Maître

Loiseau in Boulevard Beaumarchais.

She soon called back to say that he wasn't in his office and must be in the Palais de Justice.

'Try to get hold of him there.'

This time, it took nearly a quarter of an hour. They had had to look for him everywhere.

'Maître Loiseau speaking.'

'Detective Chief Inspector Maigret here. Allow me to explain what this is about, maître. In connection with a recent murder investigation, I have in custody here a client of yours, Louis Mahossier. I tried to ask him a few questions this morning but got virtually nowhere. He'll only talk if you're there, and I see no objection to that. Could you be in my office at about four?'

'Impossible. I have to be in court at three. But if you can make it five …'

'Five o'clock. That's fine.'

Maigret had only just hung up when Torrence brought him a fairly slender file, the one on the Nina Lassave case from 1946. He took off his jacket, lit another pipe and sat down to look through the papers.

First up was a statement by the concierge, made in the local police station. Not having seen her tenant come down by two in the afternoon, even though she had got back early the previous evening, she had gone up and knocked at her door.

The door was slightly ajar, and the concierge walked into the apartment.

> It wasn't untidy. The drawers hadn't been looked through. In the bedroom, where everything was tidy, too, the poor young woman was lying on the bed, completely naked, with her tongue sticking out. Her empty eyes were turned up to the ceiling.

Next came the statement of the local chief inspector, a man named Maillefer, who had visited the scene of the crime with Officer Patou. He had found the victim in the state described by the concierge. Her clothes, including a print dress, were on a chair not far from the bed.

> Robbery did not appear to have been the motive. In addition, given her nakedness, the victim must have known her killer well, since she had made no move to cover herself and had let him get close to her.

Maillefer had called the Police Judiciaire from the bedroom. Detective Chief Inspector Piedbœuf had told him he would be there immediately, had advised him not to touch anything and had asked him to call the prosecutor's office.

If Maigret's memories were correct, Piedbœuf must have been just under fifty-five at the time. He was a man who knew his job and wasn't easily taken in. In fact, he was quite hard and lost patience easily.

He had been accompanied by two inspectors, one of whom now worked for Special Branch.

Piedbœuf's report was quite long and had a plan of the apartment attached to it.

> None of the furniture seems to be out of place in the various rooms, and I found three hundred francs in the victim's handbag, clearly visible on the night table.

He gave an account of the visit by the prosecutor's office, which is never anything but a formality.

Two reports were attached to Piedboeuf's, as well as a number of photographs of Nina in the state in which she had been found. The first report was by Moers. In it, he stated that his men had looked for fingerprints and had found none except for the victim's and, on the door handles, those of the concierge.

Maigret was taking notes.

The next report bore the signature of a man he had long worked with and who was now unfortunately dead, Dr Paul, pathologist and knowledgable gourmet.

In more scientific terms, he concluded that it had been death by strangulation. The young woman's neck bore marks left by the killer's fingers. The killer had had particularly strong hands.

The tenants of the building had been questioned. There weren't many of them. Nobody had heard anything. Nobody had passed anyone suspicious on the stairs.

'Did Nina Lassave have lots of visitors?'

'No.'

'But did she see someone quite frequently?'

'Two men came to see her.'

'Together?'

'No, separately. The tall man would come mostly in the middle

of the afternoon. The other one would come in the evening, and they would go out together. I don't know where they went but I spotted them one day, or rather, one evening, on the terrace of Cyrano's.'

'Which one had she been seeing for longer?'

'The one in the evening. The other one maybe only for two months.'

'Did you see either of them on the stairs on the day of the murder?'

'To tell the truth, I didn't leave my apartment until six in the evening.'

The other tenants knew even less. One of them, a middle-aged bachelor who worked in a bank in the Grands Boulevards, left home at eight in the morning and didn't get back until nine at night.

I didn't even know the woman existed, let alone that she sometimes had lovers coming to see her at home.

It was thanks to the concierge that they had tracked down Mahossier. One afternoon, she had seen him arrive in a van bearing in yellow lettering the words 'Lesage and Gélot, painters and decorators, Boulevard des Batignolles'.

More reports. The slightest question asked of a witness was the object of a report full of stereotyped phrases. How could Maigret fail to smile, rereading a report from that period.

On the orders of Detective Chief Inspector Piedbœuf, I proceeded to the premises of the Lesage and Gélot painting and decorating business at 25, Boulevard des Batignolles. I was able to speak to Monsieur Gélot, Monsieur Lesage being absent. I asked him how many workers he had and he replied that it was the off season and he only had four.

He supplied me with their names. I asked him their ages. Three of the four were over forty. One of them was even sixty.

Only a certain Louis Mahossier was younger, twenty-six in fact. I had to wait nearly thirty minutes, because he had gone to deliver material to a site. He was driving the van described by the concierge of the building in Boulevard Rochechouart.

Mahossier was not at all pleased. He asked me what right I had to question him and began by claiming that he did not know Nina

Lassave. I asked him to come with me to Boulevard Rochechouart and there the concierge recognized him immediately. He was the same man she had seen on the stairs two days earlier, at approximately the time when the young woman had been killed.

As a result of which I asked him to come with me to Quai des Orfèvres where I handed him over to my superior, Detective Chief Inspector Piedbœuf.

Maigret mopped his brow.

There had been four interrogations of Mahossier, who had not varied in his statements. He claimed that that day, at about the time the murder had been committed, he was in his van, carrying cans of paint to Rue de Courcelles.

His colleagues who had received the paint confirmed what he said but were less specific about the time.

Examining Magistrate Coméliau had asked to see him and had asked him a number of questions.

Marcel Vivien had also been questioned, as had the owner and the waiter in the café in Boulevard de la Chapelle.

Vivien was in a terrible state. The death of his girlfriend seemed to have drained him of all his energy. They had found nothing against him, and he had gone back to his little hotel in Place des Abbesses.

Mahossier had been investigated more thoroughly but, in the end, due to the lack of any real evidence, they had decided to drop him from their inquiries.

The file did not carry the words ‘Case Closed’, because the police never close an unsolved case, but it was as good as.

‘Torrence! In a quarter of an hour, I’d like you to fetch Mahossier from the cells.’

That gave him enough time to go and have a beer at the Brasserie Dauphine. If Maître Loiseau was as tough to crack as his client, the interrogation was likely to be a difficult one.

By the time he got back, Mahossier was already sitting on a chair in his office, and Torrence was ready with his shorthand notebook.

‘We have to wait for Maître Loiseau.’

Mahossier gave no indication that he had heard. Maigret casually leafed through the file, reminding himself of certain details.

Maître Loiseau arrived in his robe, through the door that joined the Police Judiciaire and the Palais de Justice.

‘I’m sorry, my case was delayed by a quarter of an hour.’

‘Please take a seat. I’m going to ask your client a number of questions. So far, he’s systematically denied everything. Do you know what he’s accused of?’

‘Accused? That’s going rather far. I didn’t know the legal examination had even started yet.’

‘Let’s say that we suspect him of the murder of a tramp named Marcel Vivien in a disused building in Impasse du Vieux-Four.’

Maigret turned to Mahossier.

‘I’m first going to establish that you were in Les Halles that night.’

‘Do you have witnesses who can be trusted?’

‘Judge for yourself …’

He sent Torrence to fetch the man known as Toto, who had been brought by an inspector from the first arrondissement along with fat Nana. Toto, not overawed in any way, like a man who is used to the police, looked at everyone in turn. When his gaze fell on Mahossier, his face lit up.

‘But I know that guy! How’s it going, my friend? I hope you’re not in any trouble.’

Maigret asked:

‘Where and when did you meet him?’

‘In Les Halles, of course. That’s where I spend my nights.’

‘Could you tell us where you were exactly.’

‘Less than ten metres from Pharamond’s. I was watching a lorry being unloaded. A pal of mine was there. If you can call him that, he wasn’t really friends with anyone. Vivien, his name was. He was unloading vegetables, and I was waiting for another lorry to arrive so I could get hired.’

‘What happened next?’

‘The door of Pharamond’s opened, and this fellow came out of the restaurant. He stopped for a while to watch the men unloading. I took advantage to go up to him and ask him for enough to buy myself a glass of red wine. Instead of giving me a one-franc coin, he gave me a five-franc one, which meant I could afford a whole bottle.’

‘Had you seen him in Les Halles before?’

‘No, never.’

‘And you’re there often?’

‘Every night for the last fifteen years.’

‘I’m quite happy for you to ask the witness a few questions, maître.’

‘What day did what you’ve just told us happen?’

‘As if I keep count of the days! All I know is, it was the night Vivien

was bumped off.'

'Are you sure of that?'

'Yes.'

'You weren't drunk?'

'By three in the morning, yes, but not at ten in the evening.'

'And you're sure you recognize him?'

'He recognizes me too, I can see it in his eyes.'

Maigret turned to Mahossier.

'Is that true?'

'I've never seen this human trash before.'

'Human trash … Human trash …'

Torrence pushed the man outside and brought in the fat woman with her swollen legs and fingers like blood sausages. She hadn't yet drunk too much, but all the same was swaying a little.

Once seated, she, too, looked around her and reached out her right hand towards Mahossier.

'That's him,' she said in a husky voice that must have been her usual voice.

'Who are you referring to?'

'The man who came out about ten in the evening from the restaurant where the rich folk go to eat tripe.'

'Do you know the name of this restaurant?'

'Pharamond's.'

'Are you sure it was this man?'

'Absolutely. I even saw Toto talking to him. He told me afterwards that the man had given him a hundred-sou coin. He even bought me a glass of wine.'

'Do you recognize her, Mahossier?'

'Not at all. I've never seen this woman, and she's never seen me in Les Halles.'

Maigret turned back to Nana.

'Did you see him again after that?'

'The same night, about three o'clock. I was sitting in a doorway at the corner of Rue de la Grande-Truanderie and Impasse du Vieux-Four. I heard footsteps, and a tall, thin guy walked right past me. He was easy to recognize, especially as there's a streetlamp right on the corner.'

'Do you know where he went?'

'Into a house they've had marked down for demolition for ten years now and that's going to collapse one of these days.'

'Mahossier, do you recognize this woman?'

‘I’ve never seen her before.’

Maître Loiseau sighed:

‘If all your witnesses are like this …’

‘You can take her back into the corridor, Torrence.’

‘Shall I bring in the third witness?’

‘In a moment … The first time I questioned you, you denied having dinner at Pharamond’s that evening. Do you still deny it?’

‘Yes, I do.’

‘Where did you have dinner, then? Not at home, you told me, because your mother-in-law was there, and you don’t get on well with her.’

‘In a snack bar in the Grands Boulevards.’

‘Would you recognize it?’

‘Possibly.’

‘Did you have a drink?’

‘I never drink, except for a glass of wine with my meals.’

‘So you’ve never set foot in Pharamond’s?’

Maigret signalled to Torrence, who admitted a man in his fifties dressed in black from head to toe.

‘Please take a seat, Monsieur Genlis.’

‘In my profession, I’m more often called Robert.’

‘Would you mind telling us what profession that is and where you practise it?’

‘I’m assistant head waiter at Pharamond’s.’

‘And as such, I assume you keep an eye on who comes in and out.’

‘Most of the time, I’m the one who shows them to a table.’

‘Is there anyone in this office you’ve seen before?’

‘Yes.’

And he pointed to Mahossier, who this time turned slightly pale.

‘When did you last see him?’

‘I’ve only seen him once, on Monday evening. He was on his own, which is quite rare among our customers. He ate quite quickly. I opened the door for him when he went out.’

‘Do you agree with that, Monsieur Mahossier?’

‘I’ve haven’t set foot in Pharamond’s in more than ten years. This man claims to have seen me just once, in a room full of people.’

‘How do you know it was full of people?’

‘I assume it was. Given the reputation of the place …’

‘The thing is,’ Monsieur Genlis remarked, ‘I’ve rarely seen a customer who was so tall or so thin.’

‘Any questions, Maître Loiseau?’

‘No. I’ll keep that for the official examination by a magistrate.’

‘Thank you for your help, Monsieur Genlis. I won’t keep you any longer.’

‘Do you have any other witnesses, inspector?’

‘We’ve finished with this case for today.’

The lawyer stood up as if he were relieved.

‘We’re going on now to the second case.’

‘There’s a second case? Isn’t it enough to accuse my client of murdering a tramp he’s never seen?’

But this time Mahossier had definitely turned pale. It brought out the bags under his eyes and the bitter crease of his tight lips.

‘All right, go ahead.’

‘Do you remember the 16th of August 1946, Mahossier?’

‘Absolutely not. I have no reason to remember it. I suppose I worked, like any other day. In those days I was trying to put money aside and I didn’t take holidays.’

‘You worked for Lesage and Gélot.’

‘That’s right.’

He seemed surprised and worried.

‘You often drove a van with those two names on it.’

‘Quite often, yes.’

‘That day, you had some cans of paint to take to your workmates who were working in Rue de Courcelles.’

‘I don’t remember.’

‘I have here the statement you made to Chief Inspector Piedbœuf. I assume you admit you were questioned several times by him?’

And Maigret showed him the file.

‘What are you trying to prove?’

‘Where were you living?’

‘I don’t remember. I was living in hotels and often moved around.’

‘Let me refresh your memory. You were living in the Hôtel Jonard in Place des Abbesses. Do you know who else was living there?’

‘I didn’t know anyone there.’

‘You just met him again, in Les Halles, after twenty years. I’m talking about Marcel Vivien, whose girlfriend was Nina Lassave.’

‘That’s nothing to do with me.’

‘On the contrary. She often visited Vivien. I don’t know if you followed her, but the concierge recognized you and stated that, during the last two months, you visited her quite often.’

Maître Loiseau asked:

‘Is this concierge here?’

‘She died several years ago in her village where she had retired.’

‘In other words, she won’t be able to testify, which is very convenient for you. So far, you’ve presented us with two filthy, half-witted drunks, a man who lives off tips and now a dead woman. Who’s next, I wonder?’

‘All in good time,’ Maigret said, filling another pipe.

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The lawyer checked his watch, which presumably, like Maigret's, showed 6.10. He was still a young man and was trying hard to seem important. He sprang to his feet.

'Have you finished with my client, inspector?'

'I don't know.'

'I'm afraid I have to go, I have a meeting in my office in twenty minutes and I can't miss it.'

Maigret made a vague gesture as if to say:

'That's up to you.'

Loiseau turned to Mahossier.

'A word of advice. If you're asked any more questions, don't answer them. That's your absolute right. Nobody can force you to talk.'

Mahossier didn't react. He had grown more solemn, less aggressive. It was as if he were starting to realize the seriousness of his situation and, in addition, that his lawyer was only concerned with showing himself in his best light.

Maître Loiseau walked out with the same self-important air with which he had come in. As if in passing, Maigret murmured:

'A word of advice. If you go to court, get a different lawyer. That one will only antagonize the magistrates and the jurors.'

He added:

'It is indeed your right not to answer, but many people will see that as an indication, even evidence, of guilt. I won't ask you any more questions, but you can always interrupt me if you so wish.'

He was observing Mahossier with a great deal of attention. It struck him that the man was less aggressive than he had been in La Baule or at the beginning of this interrogation. Rather, he now seemed like an overgrown schoolboy who keeps sulking even if he no longer wants to.

'Detective Chief Inspector Piedbœuf was an excellent policeman who

wasn't determined to be right at any cost. By the way, Nina Lassave had a birthmark on her left cheek, didn't she?'

'Is this a trap?'

'Not even that. The file my colleague put together is proof enough that you were the woman's lover.'

'The concierge is dead.'

'But we still have her statements. There's a transcript here from when she was brought face to face with you. You challenged her. "How did you find out my name?" You were convinced she wouldn't be able to answer. But this is what she said: "One afternoon, I was in my lodge with a friend who comes from time to time to have something to eat. I can give you her name and address. After a while, this man (she pointed to you) came in through the arch, and we could see him clearly through the glazed door. She seemed surprised. 'Oh, look! My painter. He's the one who painted my kitchen and laid the carpet in my dining room. His name's Louis Mahossier, and he works for a company on Boulevard des Batignolles.'" This friend, Lucile Gosset, was questioned and confirmed this conversation. In fact it was thanks to her that you were tracked down so quickly. About four in the afternoon on the day Nina was strangled, you were working in Rue Ballu, in Lucile Gosset's apartment. She'd gone out shopping. You rushed over there …'

Mahossier was looking at him with a frown. It was as if there was something he couldn't seize hold of, something he was trying to understand.

'I could read you the concierge's testimony. The postman brought an express letter for a tenant on the third floor and she went upstairs. On the way down, she passed you as you were going up to see Nina. Do you still deny it?'

There was no reply. As Maigret spoke, Louis Mahossier grew calmer, although he remained tense.

'You were both crazy about her. I don't know what she had that inspired such passion. Marcel Vivien left his wife and daughter for her, and yet she didn't want to live with him. She never spent a whole night with him. Or with you, for that matter. I don't know if it was a sign of her upbringing.'

Maigret was speaking in a slightly muted voice. Every now and again, he would mechanically turn the pages of the file he had in front of him.

'To get back to the afternoon when Nina was strangled, Marcel Vivien did of course have an alibi, but there were gaps in it.'

Mahossier looked at Maigret with closer attention.

‘This morning, I came across a note written in the margins of the file by my colleague. Let me read it to you: “An elderly regular of the bistro in Boulevard de la Chapelle came forward of his own free will. He was clearly a little drunk. His name is Arthur Gilson, but he has the nickname Wooden Leg because he has a stiff leg that makes him walk as if he had an artificial leg. He claims that, during that afternoon, Marcel Vivien came into the bistro at about three thirty and had two cognacs one after the other. What made that particularly startling was that he usually only drank coffee. Again according to Arthur Gilson, Vivien then headed for Boulevard Rochechouart.”’

Maigret fell silent for a moment and looked intensely at Mahossier.

‘I should tell you immediately that none of the other people who were in the bistro confirmed that statement. Or rather, the owner admitted that the scene did take place, but the day after Nina died. One of them’s right and the other’s wrong. My colleague seems to have leaned towards the owner.’

Mahossier could not help asking:

‘And you?’

‘I’m tempted to believe Wooden Leg. He was old, but he had his wits about him. He’s dead now. All that’s left is this note by Chief Inspector Piedbœuf … Vivien had been Nina’s lover for more than six months. After cutting all ties with his family, he thought of her as his. She met you and gave herself to you while still having intimate relations with Vivien … Vivien didn’t often go to see her in the afternoon. It was the evenings he spent with her, although he also had lunch with her in a little restaurant.’

Mahossier’s features hardened again.

‘During the investigation, the concierge didn’t remember seeing him come in or go out. She was asked what she was doing at the time and she answered that she was knitting by the window and listening to the radio. Now, sitting by the window, it wouldn’t have been easy for her to see people coming in under the arch.’

‘Where does this lead you?’

‘To suspect Vivien of killing his girlfriend, who was also yours. Maybe he even saw you come out of the building? We’ll never know. The fact remains, he was furious, literally destroyed by the pain of it. He might not have come to Boulevard Rochechouart to kill her and he didn’t have any weapon with him. Maybe he only wanted to catch you with her. He found her lying naked on the bed. Who would she have undressed for if she wasn’t expecting him? As far as he was concerned, he had done it all

for her. He was ashamed of having left his wife and daughter with nothing. And now she was cheating on him with the first man she found. I don't know what they said to each other, but she couldn't get him to calm down. She wasn't afraid, we know that from the position she was found in. But he was in an agitated enough state to strangle her. Now his whole life had come to an end. He didn't see how he could ever go back to Rue Caulaincourt, even to his workshop in Rue Lepic. Nothing mattered to him any more. He might not have been upset for the police to pin the crime on you.'

'That's pretty much what they did, what you yourself did at first. I always said I didn't kill her.'

'When did you find out that she was dead?'

'Fifteen minutes later. I saw Vivien come running out and setting off in the direction of Place Blanche. I wanted to ask Nina what he was doing there. I went into the building, and it was as I was climbing the stairs that I passed the concierge. When I got to the apartment, the door was ajar. That struck me as suspicious. Two minutes later, I discovered the body. That was when I erased my fingerprints, wiping everything I'd touched, even in the last few days. In doing that, I must have wiped Vivien's prints, too.'

'Why didn't you accuse him?'

'Because I'd decided to punish him myself.'

Poor Torrence was struggling to keep up with the rapid pace of what was no longer a monologue from Maigret but a genuine conversation.

Maigret had found the weak spot, and Mahossier had lost his stiffness.

'You were that much in love with her?'

'She's the only woman I've ever really loved.'

'What about the woman you married?'

'I like her a lot. She likes me, too, but I don't think she's ever really been in love with me.'

'It all happened twenty years ago, Mahossier.'

'I know. All the same, I think about her every day.'

'Don't you think that was true of Vivien, too? He was as much in love as you were, enough to commit murder. He didn't try to make a new life for himself. He preferred to go downhill immediately. He became a tramp. A tramp you met by chance after twenty years …'

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Mahossier was silent, staring down at his shoes. His face had changed. He had lost his arrogance and become more human.

'You had twenty good years.'

He glanced at Maigret, and on his thin lips there was a vague smile full of irony.

'I didn't kill her, it's true. But I am the indirect cause of her death.'

'You worked hard, you saved. You managed to establish yourself in your own right and did well in business. You have a nice, pretty wife. You live in a wonderful apartment and you own a villa in La Baule. And yet you risked all that to kill a man you hadn't seen in twenty years, a man who, during that time, had become a wreck.'

'I'd vowed to punish him.'

'Why not leave that to the law?'

'He'd have pleaded that it was a crime of passion and would have got away with a short sentence. By now, he'd have been free for a long time.'

'Your lawyer will plead it was a crime of passion in your case, too.'

'Right now, I don't care. Just yesterday, I was determined to deny it, to defend myself.'

'The evidence against you, whatever you think, is too strong.'

The telephone rang.

'Ascan here, from the first arrondissement. Is everything all right?'

'Everything's fine. I've had Mahossier in my office for more than two hours now.'

'Has he confessed?'

'Yes.'

'He'd have had to anyway, even if he didn't want to. Some children who were playing on a patch of waste ground, next to the dilapidated building where Vivien had made his nest, just brought me a .32 calibre

pistol. Three bullets are missing in the magazine. One of my men is on the way to the Police Judiciaire to hand it over to you.'

'It'll be an extra piece of evidence.'

'Did he also kill Nina Lassave?'

'No.'

'Who was it? Vivien?'

'Yes.'

'You mean that after twenty years Mahossier was still enough in love with Nina Lassave to avenge her?'

'Yes. Thank you, Ascan. You've been an enormous help to me. In fact, it's you and your men who've done most of the work in this case.'

'That's an exaggeration. I'll leave you to your interview.'

Mahossier had tried to follow the conversation, but the words Maigret had uttered meant nothing without hearing what had been said at the other end of the line.

'During these past twenty years, have you looked for him in Paris?'

'Not systematically. I'd look at people in the street. I don't know why, but I was sure I'd meet him one day … I did have dinner at Pharamond's. I'd come to Les Halles on foot. The restaurant reminded me of old memories, of a time when Pharamond's was the height of luxury, something well out of my reach. I went in and had dinner on my own at a table … My mother-in-law can't stand me and never stops needling me. She resents the fact that I started out as a house painter. She also found out that I was born in Belleville and didn't know my father.'

A few minutes later, old Joseph, the usher, knocked at the door.

'An inspector from the first arrondissement is asking to see you. He has a package he needs to hand over to you personally.'

'Show him in.'

The man was young and energetic.

'I came as fast as I could, sir. I've been asked to give you this.'

And he held out his package, which was covered in parcel paper that had been used before and was all cracked. He looked curiously at Mahossier.

'Do you still need me?'

'Not for the moment. Thank you.'

When the inspector had left, Maigret opened the package.

'Is this your gun?'

'It certainly looks like it.'

'You see? Even without your confession, we'd have got to the truth.

We'll take out the remaining bullets and compare them with the ones removed from Vivien's chest. You were so afraid of being caught with this weapon in your pocket that you quickly got rid of it, throwing it on a piece of waste ground.'

Mahossier shrugged.

'It's true I gave a five-franc coin to a tramp. I also saw a fat woman who looked dead drunk. When I recognized Vivien unloading vegetables, all my anger came back and I rushed home to get my gun. I waited in the dark. It took a very long time, because another lorry arrived and he and others were hired to unload it.'

'Your hate for him hadn't faded?'

'No. I had the feeling I was doing my duty.'

'Towards Nina?'

'Yes. What made it worse was that Vivien seemed at peace with himself. Wasn't it his own choice to become a tramp? He looked for all the world as if it had brought him peace, and that put me in a rage.'

'So you waited until three in the morning?'

'Not quite. Half past two. I followed him when he headed for Impasse du Vieux-Four. The fat woman I'd noticed at Les Halles was lying in a doorway, apparently asleep, befuddled with wine. It never occurred to me she might pose a risk … Maître Loiseau will be furious about this confession, but I don't care … I saw Vivien go inside the building. I went up the stairs right behind him. I heard him close the door. I sat on a step for almost half an hour.'

'Did you want to find him asleep?'

'No. I couldn't make up my mind.'

'What made it up for you in the end?'

'Thinking about Nina, more specifically the little birthmark she had on her cheek which made her look so touching.'

'Did he wake up?'

'After the first bullet, he opened his eyes. He looked surprised. I don't know if he recognized me.'

'Did you say anything to him?'

'No. I may even have been sorry I'd come, but it was too late. The only reason I fired two more shots was because I didn't want him to suffer, believe it or not.'

'You tried to get away with it.'

'That's right. I think it's automatic. Vivien didn't go telling the police he'd killed his girlfriend either.'

His face tensed as he uttered the words 'girlfriend'. Then he shrugged

again.

'By the way, what became of Madame Vivien?'

'She's still living in the same building in Rue Caulaincourt, though in a smaller apartment. She's a dressmaker. Apparently, she has quite a lot of customers.'

'He had a daughter, too, didn't he?'

'She's married with two children.'

'And they don't seem to have suffered too much?'

Maigret preferred not to reply.

'What are you going to do with me?'

'You'll be taken back to the cells. Tomorrow, you'll be interrogated by the examining magistrate, who'll probably sign an arrest warrant. Until the examination is over, I assume you'll be kept in La Santé, after which it's quite likely you'll be detained in Fresnes until your trial.'

'Will I be able to see my wife again?'

'Not for a while.'

'When will the newspapers announce my arrest?'

'Tomorrow. In fact I think a reporter and a photographer are already waiting in the corridor.'

Maigret was a little weary. He, too, had suddenly relaxed and he had a slightly empty feeling. He spoke in muted tones. He didn't seem triumphant and yet he was relieved.

He had two murderers instead of one. Was that what he had obscurely sought?

'I'm going to make a request which I suppose you'll have to deny. I don't want my wife to find out what's happening to me from the papers, let alone from a phone call from her mother or a friend. She must be having dinner. I'm sure she'll be at the villa.'

'What's your telephone number?'

'124.'

'Hello, mademoiselle, can you get me 124 in La Baule? It's urgent, yes.'

Now he was the one who was in a hurry to be free again. Three minutes later, he was put through.

'The villa Les Pins Parasols?'

'Yes.'

'Madame Mahossier? Maigret here. I have your husband in my office. He'd like a few words with you.'

Maigret walked over to the window and stood there, puffing at his pipe.

‘Yes. I’m at the Police Judiciaire. Are you alone?’

‘With the maid.’

‘Listen to me carefully. This is going to be a shock.’

‘Do you think so?’

‘Yes. I’ve just confessed. I couldn’t help it.’

Contrary to what he had expected, she remained calm.

‘Both of them?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Both murders.’

‘Boulevard Rochechouart wasn’t me, but Vivien was.’

‘I guessed as much. And, when you saw him again after twenty years, all your old jealousy came back.’

‘You knew?’

‘I thought of it right away.’

‘Because of what?’

‘Because I know you.’

‘What will you do now?’

‘First, I’m going to finish my holidays here, unless the examining magistrate summons me. After that, I don’t know yet. There’s never been that much love between us. At the end of the day, I was only ever a substitute. My mother will probably pester me to ask for a divorce.’

‘Oh!’

‘Does that surprise you?’

‘No. Not really. Goodbye, Odette.’

‘Goodbye, Louis.’

When he hung up, he was almost swaying. He hadn’t foreseen that the phone call would turn out that way. It wasn’t only what had been said but everything it implied. Fifteen years of his life had been wiped out in a few minutes.

Maigret opened his cupboard and poured a small glass of cognac.

‘Drink this.’

Mahossier hesitated, looking at Maigret with eyes full of astonishment.

‘I didn’t know …’ he stammered.

‘That your wife had guessed?’

‘She’s going to ask for a divorce.’

‘What would you want her to do? Wait for you?’

‘I don’t understand anything any more.’

He knocked back his cognac and coughed. Then, without sitting down again, he murmured:

‘Thank you for being gentle with me.’

‘Take him back to the cells, Torrence.’

Torrence, big as he was, seemed shaken. Mahossier waited for him in the middle of the office. Curiously, he no longer seemed so tall, and his face, its features blurred, looked quite ordinary now.

He almost held out his hand but didn’t do so.

‘Goodbye, inspector.’

‘Goodbye.’

Maigret felt heavy. He paced up and down, heavily, while waiting for Torrence to come back.

‘I think there was a moment there when I was quite moved,’ Torrence admitted.

‘Shall we get a drink in Place Dauphine?’

‘Definitely.’

They left Quai des Orfèvres on foot and walked to the familiar bar. Several inspectors were there, but only one from the Crime Squad.

‘What’ll it be, inspector?’ the owner asked.

‘A large draught beer. The largest you have.’

Torrence ordered the same thing. Maigret drank his beer almost in one go and held out the glass to the owner to be refilled.

‘Makes you thirsty, doesn’t it?’

To which Maigret replied, as if mechanically repeating words whose meaning didn’t strike him:

‘Yes, it makes you thirsty.’

He returned home by taxi.

‘I was wondering if you’d be back for dinner.’

He collapsed into his armchair and mopped his brow.

‘As far as my side of things goes, the case is closed.’

‘Has the murderer been arrested?’

‘Yes.’

‘The man you went to see in La Baule?’

‘Yes.’

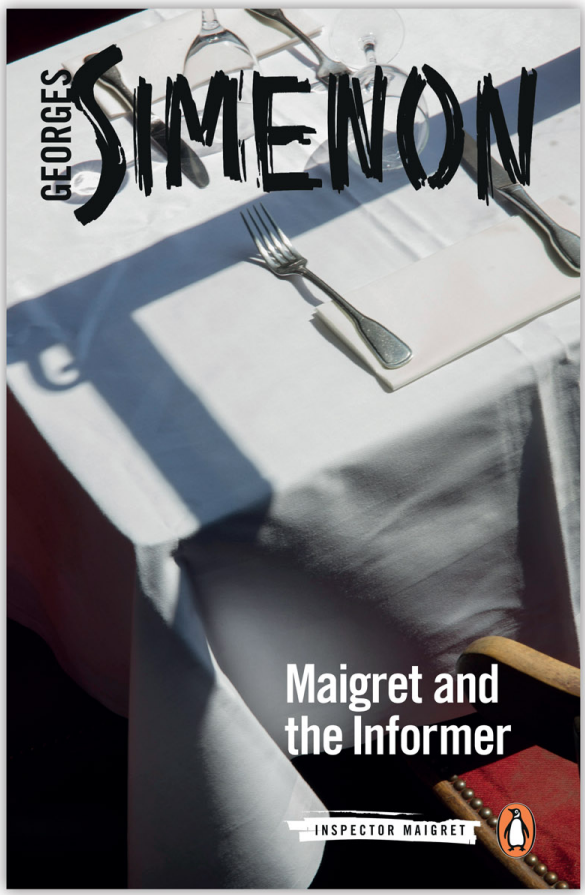
‘Wouldn’t you like to go out for dinner? All I have is cold meats and Russian salad.’

‘I’m not hungry.’

‘The table’s laid, you might as well eat.’

That evening, he didn’t watch television and went to bed at ten.

Mon ami
Maigret


GEORGES
SIMENON
Maigret and
the Informer
INSPECTOR MAIGRET

1.

When the telephone rang, Maigret groaned with annoyance. He hadn't the slightest idea what time it was, and it didn't occur to him to look at the alarm clock. He was emerging from a deep sleep and still felt a tightness in his chest.

He shuffled over to the telephone in bare feet like a sleepwalker.

'Hello.'

He didn't take in that it was his wife, rather than him, who had switched on one of the bedside lights.

'Is that you, chief?'

He didn't recognize the voice immediately.

'It's Lucas here. I'm on the night shift. I've just had a call from the eighteenth arrondissement.'

'And?'

'They've found a man murdered in Avenue Junot.'

That was right at the top of the Butte de Montmartre, not far from Place du Tertre.

'I'm calling because of the dead man's identity. It's Maurice Marcia, who owns La Sardine.'

A distinctively Parisian restaurant on Rue Fontaine.

'What was he doing on Avenue Junot?'

'Apparently he wasn't killed there. First impressions are that he was left there when he was already dead.'

'I'm on my way.'

'Do you want me to send a car to pick you up?'

'Yes.'

Madame Maigret had been watching him from her bed throughout this exchange, but now she got up and felt around for her slippers.

'I'll go and make you a cup of coffee.'

It was a bad night for it – or maybe too good a one. It had been the Maigrets' turn to have the Pardons over for dinner. There was an unspoken agreement between them, consolidated over the years.

Once a month Doctor Pardon and his wife would have the Maigrets

over to dinner at their apartment in Boulevard Voltaire. Then two weeks later it would be their turn to come to Boulevard Richard-Lenoir.

The wives would cook up a storm and swap recipes, while the husbands would chat idly over a glass of sloe gin or raspberry brandy.

Tonight's dinner had been a particular success. Madame Maigret had made a pintadeaux en croute, and Maigret had dug out from his cellar one of the last bottles from a case of vintage Châteauneuf du Pape that he had bought at auction one day when he was passing Rue Drouot.

The wine was superb, and the two men hadn't left a drop. How many little glasses of sloe gin had they followed it up with? Either way, when he was jolted awake at two in the morning, Maigret didn't feel his best.

He knew Maurice Marcia well. Everyone in Paris did. Back when he was a duty inspector, before Marcia had become a respectable member of society, he had had him in his office for questioning on various occasions.

Later, he and Madame Maigret had had dinner from time to time at Rue Fontaine, where the cooking was first-rate.

She brought him his cup of coffee when he was almost dressed.

'Is it serious?'

'It could cause a stir.'

'Someone well known?'

'Monsieur Maurice, as everyone calls him. Maurice Marcia, that is.'

'From La Sardine?'

He nodded.

'Has he been murdered?'

'Apparently. I'd better go and have a look.'

He sipped his coffee, filled a pipe, then went and opened the window a little to see what the weather was like. It was still raining; such a fine, slow rain that you could only see it in the haloes of the streetlights.

'Are you taking your raincoat?'

'I won't bother. It's too hot.'

It was only May – a glorious May until recently, but then the weather had broken, and storms had given way to this vague drizzle that had been falling for the past twenty-four hours.

'See you soon.'

'You know, that guinea fowl you made was marvellous.'

'Not too heavy?'

He chose to leave that question unanswered because he could still feel it sitting on his stomach.

A small black car was waiting for him at the door.

‘Avenue Junot.’

‘What number?’

‘You’ll probably see a crowd.’

The streets looked black and glossy, as if they had been lacquered. There was almost no traffic. It took only a few minutes to get to Montmartre, but not the Montmartre of nightclubs and tourists. Avenue Junot was on the fringes, so to speak, of all that hustle and bustle, a street mainly lined with villas which artists, who had started on the Butte and remained loyal to it, had commissioned after becoming successful.

They spotted a crowd on the right-hand pavement and, despite the late hour, saw lights on in the windows and people in their night clothes leaning out.

The local chief inspector had already arrived, a shy, thin little man who came rushing up to Maigret.

‘I’m glad you’re here, detective chief inspector. This is something that really could cause a scandal.’

‘Are you sure it’s him?’

‘Here’s his wallet …’

He handed him a black crocodile-skin wallet which was empty except for an identity card, a driving licence and a piece of notepaper with a few telephone numbers written on it.

‘No money?’

‘A big roll of notes – three or four thousand francs, I haven’t counted – in his hip pocket.’

‘No gun?’

‘A Smith and Wesson that hasn’t been used recently.’

Maigret went over to the body and had a strange sensation looking down at Monsieur Maurice. He was wearing a dinner-jacket, as he did every evening, and there was a large bloodstain across his shirt-front.

‘Any blood on the pavement?’

‘No.’

‘Who found the body?’

‘I did,’ a soft voice said behind him.

It was an old man whose white hair formed a halo around his head. Maigret thought he recognized quite a well-known painter but couldn’t remember his name.

‘I live in the house just opposite. Sometimes I wake up at night and have trouble getting back to sleep …’

He was wearing an old raincoat, which he had put on over his

pyjamas, and a pair of red slippers.

'When that happens, I go over to the window and look out. Avenue Junot is quiet, deserted. Cars hardly ever come down here. I was surprised to see a black and white shape on the pavement and I went down to have a look. I rang the police station. These men turned up in a car with its siren blaring, and all the windows filled with inquisitive faces.'

There were about twenty people on the street, passers-by and neighbours in night clothes, looking at the body and the little knot of officials. A local doctor explained:

'That's me finished here. He's very much dead, I can assure you. Now it's a matter for the pathologist.'

'I've called him,' announced the chief inspector. 'And I've informed the prosecutor's office.'

An assistant prosecutor was getting out of a car at that moment, in fact, accompanied by his clerk. He was surprised to find Maigret on the scene.

'Do you think it's an important case?'

'I'm afraid it might be. Do you know Maurice Marcia?'

'No.'

'Haven't you ever eaten at La Sardine?'

'No.'

He had to explain to him that it was the sort of place where you were as likely to run into socialites and artists as you were major-league criminals.

Doctor Bourdet, the pathologist who had taken over from Doctor Paul, got out of a taxi, grumbling. He distractedly shook hands and remarked to Maigret:

'Hah! You're here too!'

Bending over the body, he examined the wound by the light of an electric torch produced from his bag.

'Only one bullet, if I'm not mistaken, but large calibre and fired practically at point-blank range.'

'What was the time of death?'

'If he was brought straight here, the murder must have been committed around midnight. Let's say between midnight and one in the morning. I'll tell you more after the post-mortem.'

Maigret went over to Véliard, an inspector from the eighteenth arrondissement who was discreetly keeping his distance.

'Did you know Monsieur Maurice?'

‘By reputation and by sight.’

‘Did he live locally?’

‘I think he lived in the ninth. Around Rue Ballu.’

‘He didn’t have a mistress around here, did he?’

It was a strange thing to do, really, if you had a dead body on your hands, to travel from another neighbourhood so you could leave it in sleepy Avenue Junot.

‘I think I would have heard about it. Someone who could tell you is Inspector Louis of the ninth arrondissement. He knows Pigalle like the back of his hand.’

Maigret shook hands all round and was getting into the little black car when a journalist appeared, a tall fellow with unkempt red hair.

‘Monsieur Maigret …’

‘Not now. Talk to the inspector or the chief inspector.’

Turning to his driver, he said, ‘Rue Ballu.’

He had automatically hung on to the dead man’s identity card. Glancing at it, he added:

‘21a.’

It was quite a sprawling town-house, one of several in the street, which had been turned into apartments. Among the brass plates on the right of the door, they saw one with the name of a dentist, referring people to the second floor. On the third floor was a neurologist.

The bell woke the concierge.

‘Monsieur Maurice Marcia, please.’

‘Monsieur Maurice is never in at this time. Not before four in the morning.’

‘What about Madame Marcia?’

‘I think she’s back. I doubt she’ll see you, though. Still, have a try if you think it’s worth it. First floor on the left. They’ve got the whole floor, but the door on the right is blocked up.’

The staircase was broad and thickly carpeted, with walls of yellowish marble. The left-hand door didn’t have a nameplate. Maigret rang the bell.

There was silence at first. He rang again and eventually heard footsteps inside. Through the door a woman’s voice asked sleepily:

‘Who is it?’

‘Detective Chief Inspector Maigret.’

‘My husband isn’t at home. Go and ask at the restaurant, Rue Fontaine.’

‘Your husband isn’t there either.’

‘Have you been there?’

‘No. But I know he’s not there.’

‘Wait a moment while I put something on.’

When she opened the door, she was wearing a golden-yellow dressing gown over a white silk nightdress. She was young, much younger than her husband, who was several years older than Maigret, around sixty or sixty-two.

She observed Maigret indifferently, with the merest flicker of curiosity.

‘Why are you looking for my husband at this time of night?’

She was tall and very blonde, with the thin, lithe body of a model or a chorus girl. She couldn’t have been more than thirty.

‘Come in …’

She opened the door to a large drawing room and turned on some lights.

‘When did you see your husband last?’

‘Around eight, as usual, when he left for Rue Fontaine.’

‘In his car?’

‘Of course not. It’s five hundred metres away.’

‘Doesn’t he ever take his car?’

‘Only when it’s pouring with rain.’

‘Do you sometimes go with him?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because it’s not my place. What would I do there?’

‘So, you spend your evenings here, do you?’

She seemed surprised by these questions but didn’t take offence. She didn’t show much curiosity either.

‘Most of them. Like everyone, I sometimes go to the cinema.’

‘You don’t drop in and say hello when you’re passing?’

‘No.’

‘Did you go to the cinema tonight?’

‘No.’

‘Did you go out?’

‘No. Except to walk the dog. I only stayed out for a few minutes because it was raining.’

‘What time, roughly?’

‘Eleven? Maybe a little later.’

‘You didn’t run into anyone you know?’

‘No. What’s the point of these questions? Why are you interested in

what I was doing this evening?'

'Your husband is dead.'

She stared at him, wide-eyed. Her eyes were light blue, rather affecting. She opened her mouth as if to scream, but her throat closed up and she brought her hand to her chest. She searched for a handkerchief in the pocket of her dressing gown, then buried her face in it.

Maigret waited, sitting motionless in an uncomfortable Louis XV armchair.

'His heart?' she asked finally, crumpling the handkerchief into a ball.

'What do you mean?'

'He didn't like to talk about it but he had a heart condition which he saw Professor Jardin about.'

'He didn't die of heart failure. He was murdered.'

'Where?'

'I don't know. His body was moved afterwards to Avenue Junot and dumped on the pavement.'

'That's impossible! He didn't have any enemies.'

'He seems to have had at least one because he was shot.'

She jumped up.

'Where is he now?'

'At the Forensic Institute.'

'You mean they're going to …'

'Perform a post-mortem, yes. There's no way around it.'

A little white dog trotted slowly down the corridor and rubbed itself against its mistress's legs. She seemed oblivious.

'What are they saying at the restaurant?'

'I haven't been there yet. What could they say?'

'Why he left La Sardine so early. He's always the last to leave. He locks the door before cashing up.'

'Have you worked there?'

'No. It's just a restaurant. They don't have dance numbers or singing acts.'

'Did you used to be a dancer?'

'Yes.'

'Don't you dance any more?'

'Not since I got married.'

'How long ago was that?'

'Four years.'

'Where did you meet him?'

‘At La Sardine … I used to dance at the Canary. If we didn’t finish too late I’d sometimes go and have something to eat there.’

‘Is that when he noticed you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Were you a hostess too?’

She pulled a face.

‘It depends what you mean by that. If a customer asked us, we wouldn’t refuse to drink a bottle of champagne with him, but that’s as far as it went.’

‘Did you have a lover?’

‘Why do you ask me that?’

‘Because I’m trying to find out who could have a grudge against your husband.’

‘Well, I didn’t have one when I met him.’

‘Was he jealous?’

‘Very.’

‘Were you?’

‘Don’t you think, detective chief inspector, this line of questioning is a little distasteful when a woman has just learned of her husband’s death?’

‘Do you own a car?’

‘Maurice recently gave me an Alfa Romeo.’

‘What about him? What car did he have?’

‘A Bentley.’

‘Did he drive?’

‘He had a driver, but he did drive himself sometimes.’

‘I’m sorry to have been so unpleasant. Unfortunately, it’s my job …’

He stood up, sighing. The large drawing room, which had a magnificent Chinese carpet in the centre, was perfectly silent.

She showed him to the door.

‘I may have further questions in the next couple of days. Would you rather I called you in to Quai des Orfèvres or came to see you here?’

‘Here.’

‘Thank you.’

She replied with a curt good evening.

His stomach still felt strange and his head was heavy.

‘La Sardine, Rue Fontaine.’

A few expensive cars were still parked in front of the restaurant, and a liveried doorman was pacing about on the pavement. Maigret went in and took a breath of cool, air-conditioned air.

A head waiter he knew well, Raoul Comitat, came rushing up.

‘A table, Monsieur Maigret?’

‘No.’

‘If you’re after the boss, he’s not here.’

The head waiter was bald and sickly looking.

‘That’s unusual, isn’t it?’

‘It almost never happens …’

The restaurant was spacious, with twenty or twenty-five tables. The beams on the ceiling were exposed, the walls panelled in old oak up to three-quarters of their height. Everything was heavy, opulent, but free of most of the tasteless elements that are invariably part and parcel of the rustic style.

It was after three o’clock. There were only about ten people left, predominantly actors and performers, eating quietly.

‘What time did Marcia leave?’

‘I couldn’t tell you exactly but it must have been around midnight.’

‘Didn’t that surprise you?’

‘It certainly did! I doubt it’s happened more than three or four times in twenty years. Besides, you know what he’s like. I’ve served you and your wife a number of times. Always in his dinner-jacket, standing there with his hands behind his back, watching. Looks as if he never moves but he sees everything. You think he’s out front and he’s already in the kitchen or the office.’

‘Did he say he was coming back?’

‘He just muttered:

‘“See you in a while.”

‘We were by the cloakroom. Yvonne handed him his hat. I reminded him it was raining and suggested he take his raincoat, which I could see on a hook.

‘“No need. I’m not going far,” he said.’

‘Did he seem concerned?’

‘It was hard to tell from his expression.’

‘Angry?’

‘Definitely not.’

‘Did he get a telephone call just before he left?’

‘You’ll have to ask at the desk. All the calls go through the cashier. But, tell me, why these questions?’

‘Because he’s been shot dead, and his body has been found lying on the pavement in Avenue Junot.’

The head waiter’s features stiffened and his lower lip started to tremble slightly.

‘That can’t be,’ he muttered to himself. ‘Who could have done that? I can’t think of a single enemy he had. He was a good man, deep down, very happy, very proud of his success. Was there a fight?’

‘No. He was killed somewhere else and then taken, probably by car, to Avenue Junot. You said he was wearing a hat when he went out, didn’t you?’

‘Yes.’

There had been no sign of a hat on the ground in Avenue Junot.

‘I’ve got a few questions to ask the cashier.’

The head waiter hurried over to a table that was asking for the bill. The bill was ready, and he put it on a plate, half covered with a napkin.

The cashier was a small, slender brunette with beautiful dark eyes.

‘I’m Detective Chief Inspector Maigret.’

‘I know …’

‘There’s no reason to keep you in the dark any longer: your employer has just been murdered.’

‘So that’s why you and Raoul looked as if you were plotting … I’m stunned … He was standing right where you are only moments ago.’

‘Did he get any telephone calls?’

‘Only one, just before he left.’

‘From a man? A woman?’

‘That’s just what I wondered. It could have been either, a man with a slightly high-pitched voice or a woman with a rather deep one.’

‘Had you heard that voice before?’

‘No. They asked to speak to Monsieur Maurice.’

‘Is that what they called him?’

‘Yes. Like all his friends. I asked who was calling and they said:

‘“He’ll know.”

‘I looked up, and Monsieur Maurice was already standing there, in front of me.

‘“Is it for me? What name did they give?”

‘“No name.”

‘He frowned and reached for the telephone.

‘“Who is this?”

‘Naturally I couldn’t hear what the person on the other end was saying.

‘“What’s that?” Monsieur Maurice went on, “I can’t hear you properly … What? … Are you sure? … If I get my hands on you …”

‘They must have been calling from a telephone box because they put more money in. I recognized the sound.

‘“I know where that is as well as you do …”

‘He slammed the phone down. He was heading for the door when he swung round and went into his office, behind the kitchens.’

‘Does he often go in there?’

‘Hardly ever during the evening. When he comes in he goes in there to have a look at the post. In the evenings after we close I take him the money, and we go over it together.’

‘Is the money kept here overnight?’

‘No. He takes it away in a briefcase, a special one we only really use for that.’

‘He would carry a gun as well, I imagine?’

‘He takes his automatic out of the drawer and puts it in his pocket.’

Monsieur Maurice hadn’t been carrying any money that night but he had still gone back to his office to fetch his gun.

‘Is there another gun which is kept here the whole time?’

‘No. That’s the only one I know of.’

‘Will you show me his office?’

‘One moment …’

She handed a note to Raoul Comitat.

‘This way.’

They went along a corridor with green walls. On the left, a glass panel gave a view of the kitchen, where four men seemed to be tidying up.

‘Here it is. I suppose you have the right to go in.’

The office was simple, not ostentatious. Three good leather armchairs, a mahogany Empire desk, a safe behind it, and some shelves with a few books and magazines.

‘Is there any money in the safe?’

‘No. Just the accounts. We don’t really need it. It was there when Monsieur Maurice bought the restaurant, and he never had it taken out.’

‘Where was the gun usually kept?’

‘In the right-hand drawer.’

Maigret opened it. There were papers, cigarettes, cigars, but no automatic.

‘Does Madame Marcia often ring her husband?’

‘Hardly ever.’

‘Did she ring him this evening?’

‘No. The call would have come through me.’

‘What about him? Doesn’t he ring her?’

‘Rarely. I can’t remember the last time he did. It was sometime before last Christmas.’

‘Thank you.’

Maigret was feeling the weight of his tiredness and collapsed on to the back seat of the little black car.

‘Boulevard Richard-Lenoir.’

The rain had stopped, but the ground was still glistening, and the sky was clearing in the east.

He had a vague sense that something about all this didn’t add up. It was true that Monsieur Marcia was no saint. He had had a pretty turbulent youth and had been convicted of procuring a number of times.

Then he had risen through the ranks when he was about thirty, becoming proprietor of what at the time was one of the most famous brothels in Paris, in Rue de Hanovre.

The brothel wasn’t in his name. He spent the better part of his afternoons at the races and, if not, was generally to be found playing cards with other crooks in a bistro on Rue Victor-Massé.

Some people called him the Judge. They claimed that when there was a dispute between figures in the underworld, he would have the final say.

He was a good-looking man, dressed by the best tailors, never wore anything but silk underwear. He was married and already living on Rue Ballu at that time.

He was growing stouter with age, which gave him added gravitas.

Wait! Maigret had forgotten to ask the cashier if the person who had called had had an accent. That could prove important at some stage.

For the moment, though, he was at a complete loss. He remembered something Maurice Marcia had said during one of their last encounters at Quai des Orfèvres. Marcia hadn’t been a suspect himself, but his barman seemed to have been involved in a hold-up of a branch of one of the big banks in Puteaux.

‘What do you think of this Freddy?’

The barman was called Freddy Strazzia and came from Piedmont.

‘I think he’s a good barman.’

‘Do you reckon he’s honest?’

‘Well, inspector, it depends what you mean by that. There’s honest and then there’s honest. When you and I first met, when we were both what’s called cutting our teeth, I didn’t think of myself as a dishonest man, an opinion not shared by you or the judges.

‘Gradually, I’ve changed. You could say I’ve spent almost forty years of my life becoming an honest man. Well, it’s like with religious converts. They’re meant to be the most devout, aren’t they? Similarly,

people who have worked to become honest tend to be more scrupulous than other folk.

'You're asking me if Freddy is honest. I wouldn't stake my life on it but what I am certain of is that he's not stupid enough to get himself tangled up in a mess like this.'

The car had stopped in front of his building. He thanked the driver and slowly climbed the stairs, slightly short of breath. He couldn't wait to lie down in bed and close his eyes.

'Tired?'

'I'm exhausted.'

Less than ten minutes later he was asleep.

It was almost eleven when he began to stir, and Madame Maigret immediately brought him a cup of coffee.

'Look at that!' he exclaimed in surprise. 'The sun's back.'

'Was it this case in Rue Fontaine that kept you out last night?'

'How do you know that?'

'The radio. The papers. Monsieur Maurice seems to have been a real Parisian celebrity.'

'Character, I'd say,' he corrected.

'Did you know him?'

'Ever since I started in the Police Judiciaire.'

'Do you understand why they went and dumped his body in Avenue Junot?'

'I don't understand anything so far,' he admitted. 'Least of all the fact that Marcia had his gun in his pocket.'

'So?'

'I'm amazed he didn't fire first. He must have been taken by surprise.'

Putting on his dressing gown, he went and sat in the bedroom armchair, picked up the telephone and dialled the number of the Police Judiciaire.

Lucas, who had been on night duty, would be sleeping peacefully by now. It was Janvier who answered.

'Not too tired, chief?'

'No. I'm all right now. Are you up to date with what's going on?'

'From the papers and the latest reports that have just come in, particularly the one from the eighteenth. I also got a call from Doctor Bourdet.'

'What does he say?'

'The shot was fired from about a metre, possibly a metre and a half.

The gun is most likely a short-barrelled revolver, a .32 or .38. He's sent the bullet to the laboratory. As for poor Marcia, his death was almost instantaneous, from an internal haemorrhage.'

'So he didn't bleed much?'

'Hardly at all.'

'Did he have a heart defect?'

'Bourdet didn't say anything about that. Do you want me to ring him?'

'I'll do it. I'll be in early this afternoon. Call me if anything, no matter what, comes up before then.'

A few minutes later he had Doctor Bourdet on the line.

'I suppose you're just getting out of bed,' Bourdet said to Maigret. 'I worked until nine this morning and now they've brought me another customer, a woman this time.'

'Listen, other than the gunshot wound, did you notice anything out of the ordinary, any sign of illness?'

'No. He was a healthy man, in very good shape for his age.'

'Nothing wrong with his heart?'

'As far as I can tell, his heart was in good condition.'

'Thank you, doctor.'

Hadn't Marcia's blonde wife Line mentioned Professor Jardin, who her husband went to see from time to time? He called the professor's office, then the hospital where he was told he was.

'Sorry to disturb you, professor. It's Detective Chief Inspector Maigret here. I think one of your patients met with a violent death last night. Maurice Marcia.'

'The Montmartre restaurant owner?'

'Yes.'

'I only saw him once. I think he was planning to take out life insurance and, before undergoing the official medical, he wanted to see a doctor of his own choosing.'

'What were the results?'

'His heart was in perfect condition.'

'Thank you.'

'Well,' asked Madame Maigret, 'was he ill?'

'No.'

'Why did his wife tell you …?'

'Your guess is as good as mine. Would you mind getting me another cup of coffee?'

'What do you want to eat?'

He still remembered his indigestion during the night.

‘Ham, boiled potatoes with oil and a green salad.’

‘Is that all? Haven’t you digested my guinea fowl?’

‘I have, yes, but I think Pardon and I overdid it on the sloe gin a little. Not to mention the wine.’

He stood up with a sigh and lit his first pipe of the day, then went and planted himself in front of the open window. He hadn’t been there for more than ten minutes before he was summoned to the telephone.

‘Hello, chief, Janvier here. I’ve just had a visit from Inspector Louis of the ninth arrondissement, who was hoping to see you. Apparently, he’s got something interesting to tell you. He’s wondering if you can see him early this afternoon.’

‘Tell him to come to my office at two.’

You never knew with Louis. He was a strange man. About forty-five years old, he had been a widower for roughly fifteen years and yet still dressed in black from head to foot, as if he were as much in mourning for his wife as ever. Among themselves, his colleagues in the ninth called him the Widower.

You never saw him laugh or joke. When he was on desk-duty he worked without a break. Being a non-smoker, he didn’t even have to stop to light a pipe or cigarette.

Most of the time he worked out of doors, preferably at night. He probably had the most comprehensive knowledge of Pigalle of anyone in Paris.

He rarely spoke to a prostitute or a pimp without good reason, and they watched him go by with a certain trepidation.

He lived alone in the apartment he had once shared with his wife, on the other side of the boulevard, at the bottom of Rue Lepic. He had been born in the neighbourhood himself. People often saw him doing his shopping.

He knew the pedigree of all the local crooks, the life stories of all the girls.

He would go into bars without taking off his hat and invariably order a quarter bottle of Vichy mineral water. He could stay there for a long time, watching. Sometimes he would chat to the barman.

‘I didn’t know Francis was back from Toulon.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘He’s just spotted me and slipped off to the gents.’

‘I didn’t see him. I’m surprised because usually he comes and says hello when he’s up in Paris.’

‘It’s probably because of me.’

‘Who was he with?’

‘Madeleine.’

‘That’s his old girlfriend.’

He never took notes and yet all the surnames, first names and nicknames of these ladies and gentlemen of the night were carefully filed away in his brain.

Rue Fontaine was in his area. He must have known more about Monsieur Maurice than Maigret or anyone really. Besides, he can’t have come to Quai des Orfèvres by chance, because he was a shy man.

He knew that he would never rise above the rank of inspector and quietly accepted this fact, doing his job as best he could. Having no other passions, he dedicated his life to his work.

‘I’m going down to buy some ham.’

He watched her through the window as she headed off towards Rue Servan. He was glad to have a wife like her and there was a little smile of satisfaction on his lips.

How long had Inspector Louis lived with his wife before she was run over by a bus? A few years at most, as he was only thirty when it happened. He had been looking out of the window, like Maigret now, and the accident had happened right there in front of him.

Maigret touched wood, not a habit of his, and waited at the window until he saw his wife cross the boulevard again and go back into the building.

Louis was the inspector’s surname. For a while Maigret had thought of adding him to his squad, but he was so lugubrious the atmosphere in the inspectors’ office would have been affected.

In the office in the ninth arrondissement, which was staffed by only three inspectors and a trainee, they made sure Louis worked outside as much as possible.

‘Poor man!’

‘Are you talking to yourself?’

‘What did I say?’

‘You said, “Poor man.” Were you thinking about Marcia?’

‘No. I was thinking about someone who lost his wife fifteen years ago and still wears mourning.’

‘He doesn’t dress all in black though, does he? No one does that any more.’

‘He does. He doesn’t care what people think. Some people think he’s a priest when they first see him and call him “Father”.’

‘Aren’t you going to shave? And get ready?’

‘Yes. But I’m feeling lazy, it’s lovely.’
He finished his pipe before going into the bathroom.

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